

UNDER ONE ROOF.



UNDER THE ROOF

# UNDER ONE ROOF.

AN EPISODE IN A FAMILY HISTORY.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF "WALTER'S WORD," "BY PROXY," "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,"  
ETC., ETC.



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# UNDER ONE ROOF.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE TWO MASTERS.

IN Mother England, teeming with progeny as she is, and knowing, alas, often times no more what to do with them than the old woman who lived in her shoe, the population is nevertheless partial. She has probably more sheltered nooks, far from the madding crowd, and known only to neighbours, than any other civilized country; lone spots, visited indeed by man, but occupied only by one or two families in half a score of generations; 'haunts of ancient Peace,' where the echoes only of wars and tumults have penetrated, and those obeying no obedience to the laws of sound, but reaching the stolid ear—for all recluses are stolid—after a huge interval. Some of these spots are really distant (as we count miles in England) from towns and even villages: others again are not so far removed from human communities by space as by circumstance—they are merely out of the way; the road to them leads nowhere else, and therefore no one comes by it save those who have business in the place—a quite inconsiderable number. Now and then, in these secluded glens or plateaux (for they are of both kinds) the vagrant or mistaken traveller comes upon some stately dwelling quiet as a star, which seems, like a star, to have fallen there. He asks himself, for there is perhaps no one else to ask, How came this noble edifice in so retired a spot? It reminds him of some Charles V., in stone, that has embraced the cloister.

Such a spot, and containing such an ancestral mansion, is the hamlet of Halcombe in the north of Devon. You may roam over the purple moors to north and east and south of it



for days and never dream of its existence, though it is always, so to speak, at hand ; or you may travel along the high road—and it is very high—on a coach top, seeing, as you fancy, everything upon all sides, both on sea and land, and never catch a glimpse of the tall tower of Halcombe Hall, in so deep a glen are its foundations set. At one point, indeed, where a narrow road branches westward, you might ask, if you are by nature curious, 'Whither does that lead?' and the coachman would reply, 'Only to Halcombe,' as though Halcombe were the grave—whither no one goes, with a few exceptions, however—unless compelled to do so.

Even from the west, which is the sea side of it, you can only see the spire of Halcombe Church, which is set on a little hill between the village and the ocean, a landmark to which mariners take care to give a wide berth, for the coast is cruel. True, there is a little harbour, where coal is brought by coasting vessels on calm days ; but when the least sea is 'on,' the place is unapproachable ; the little blue bay is lashed by the lightest breeze into frenzied foam, beneath which are jagged rocks and far stretching ridges of granite on which many a good ship has laid her bones. No passenger ever comes to land alive at Halcombe Point, as the place is fitly termed, for it would be irony indeed to call it harbour, and there is little salvage for the honest villagers, for what the Atlantic hurls and grinds against that rock-bound coast in clouds of spume it mostly whirls away again ; then, after some three days' fury, it will lap and smile about the rocks and ledges for a treacherous hour like some marine Macbeth with its 'Thou canst not say I did it.'

Nothing, however, but the church on the hill in Halcombe feels the fury of the gale. The village lies deep in a sheltered dell, where lofty elms and oaks grow to their full height, and never lose a limb or die from the buffets of the storm-fiend. In the centre of the hamlet, approached by a long grassy avenue, sentinelled by giant trees, stands the Hall, a composite mass of buildings, but so irregular in outline from the first that no addition has robbed it of its picturesque appearance. Its main features are Gothic, and doubtless architectural pedants would apply that term, in a deprecatory sense, to the whole mass ; but the Poet and the Painter would admit its claim to beauty of a

high order. Every room differs from its fellow not only in magnitude but form ; here juts out an oriel window, and there a bay ; here the long line of building fronts the level lawn without a break, and here again a modern conservatory, wherein the well-warmed air grows faint with alien fragrance, dazzles the eye with its white radiance.

To one who comes on Halcombe on a sudden from the lone moorland it seems as though the trees had been driven into it like sheep, from the country round, and all the flowers. It lies an oasis in the desert, fresh with foliage, and cool with verdure, and bright with blossom. There is nothing new or staring in the little village ; even the billiard-room at the Hall, built out by its preceding tenant, has already put on a decent garb of ivy which hides its modernness ; and for the most part all the houses are very old. There are no new comers, and consequently no accommodation for them is needed. When a family grows too large for its residence its surplus numbers go forth into the world without and make dwellings for themselves elsewhere.

A few hundred yards from the mansion there is the Manor Farm, almost coeval with it, and besides these two there is no house of any pretensions—the rest are cottages, all the property of the tenant of the Hall, Sir Robert Arden.

This gentleman has no ancestral connection with the place, having purchased the estate of its late tenant about four years before our story opens. It was whispered that the purchase money was no less than 90,000*l.* ; if so, it must have been a fancy price, for the Halcombe land, where it is not absolutely barren, is poor, and there are no local industries—unless a saw mill near the Point can be so termed, and some occasional wrecking. Sir Robert, however, is a man who does not count the cost in matters where his sympathies are concerned, and Halcombe seems in his eyes, when he became a widower, the very place wherein to bury himself and his great sorrow. He lost his young wife with his only child, in her confinement, and sought this place of retirement, as a stricken deer some solitary spot wherein to sob out its last hours. He did not, however, pass them altogether in this way, for within eighteen months of his bereavement he married again.

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His second wife was a widow with four children, all of whom he took to his generous heart as though they were his own. The question, Why did he do so? often put by his neighbours, was like all other inquiries of a similar nature, either very easily answered or quite inexplicable. Mrs. Nicoll, though not of course in her first youth, was still young, and very beautiful after her own fashion—plump of figure, gentle of speech, and with a complexion of cream. Perhaps he chose her out of delicate compliment to his first wife, who was her antipodes in every way. No. II. could never remind him of No. I., whose pure image remained in his heart as uninjured by Comparison as by Time. Such was the opinion of one who knew Sir Robert at least as well as he knew himself, though I am aware it is open to ridicule. The second Lady Arden also entertained the same view. Before she married Sir Robert she may have entertained a secret hope that in time she would occupy the first place in his affection, though he had given her fair warning that that could never be; but she soon came to acknowledge that she had no power to oust from his bosom her dead rival. After all it was not a woman, but only the memory of one, which thus came between her and her husband's love; and the subordination was not intolerable. Moreover, it must be considered, that though his dead Madeline thus remained his idol, enshrined in the very temple of his soul, his living Mary was in no way neglected; she had all that money could buy, and almost all that heart could wish. She saw her children possessed of a second father, and herself the object of his tenderest care and regard. He made her as absolute mistress of Halcombe Hall as though he were dead, and had left it to her for use during her life. Notwithstanding that her four children found a permanent home in it, she had *carte blanche* to invite whom she pleased thither; she would ask permission just for form's sake, but his answer was invariable. 'Well, my dear, there is surely room enough.'

Everybody thought Lady Arden 'a very lucky woman,' and in saying so perhaps implied that she did not quite deserve it. Not that there was anything to find fault with in her ladyship, who, though she had some fashionable tastes, was both dutiful and simple; nay, though somewhat hypochondriacal, she was

really genuine, so far as she went—but then she went but a very little way. What her neighbours meant to imply was that though a deserving woman as women go, the widow herself had in her second marriage been rewarded above her deserts.

At the same time, even in her sunny lot there was a crumpled roseleaf. Being by nature more than tolerably just, it was only to be looked for that all friends of her husband would have been welcome under that roof. His nephew and only blood relation was, for example, as dear to her as one of her own family, indeed he was one day to become such, for his uncle had set his heart upon his marriage with Evelyn Nicoll, Lady Arden's eldest daughter, into which arrangement the young people had fallen without the least remonstrance; he had been prosecuting his studies on the Continent, after he took his degree at Cambridge, and was now expected home. But there was another person 'on Sir Robert's side of the house,' as the simple Halcombe folks termed it, who was not so agreeable to Lady Arden—notwithstanding that he did his best to make himself so. This was Ferdinand Walcot, the brother of Sir Robert's first wife, and who exercised a great and somewhat inexplicable influence over him. Perhaps, to begin with, Lady Arden resented the fact that this person, who was 'neither kith nor kin' to Sir Robert, should in these latter days have been admitted to his confidence solely on the ground of the relationship to his dead wife. This intimacy of the two men dated, indeed, from after Sir Robert's second marriage, and perhaps her ladyship had a shrewd suspicion that had they come together earlier she would never have been Lady Arden at all.

There was nothing, however, in Mr. Walcot's conduct to suggest this; on the contrary, he was polite and deferential to her in a high degree; if he erred in behaviour, it was, if one may say so, in the other direction; on the very rare and trivial occasions when Sir Robert and his wife disagreed, Mr. Walcot always took the side of the latter, and in so doing occasionally threw into his manner a touch of patronage. Some wives are very sensitive on a point of this kind; they do not wish to receive foreign aid in contending with their husbands, and

especially to owe their victory to it. And it must be acknowledged that, whatever Mr. Ferdinand Walcot took in hand was not only done, and effectually, but also suggested the idea that he could do twice or even ten times as much with equal ease : a state of things, which, when we ourselves have had some trouble with the same matters and have failed, it is not in human nature not to resent.

With the exception of this trifling and only occasional source of friction, the relations of Mr. Walcot with the mistress of the Hall were amicable, if not cordial ; while with the other inmates of the house he was on excellent terms. As these persons were of both sexes and of various characters, this must be surely put down to his credit. Nature, too, there was no doubt, had been friendly to Ferdinand Walcot. He was thirty-five years of age, but had still the figure and even the grace of youth. His dark hair, though it could not boast of a curl, was still fine and plentiful ; his face was handsome, pale, and full of thought. At the first glance you would have said, ' This is a student ; ' but there was too much mobility of feature, of the lively play of intelligence, for a lover of books. His eyes were large, soft, and gentle, but cou'd on occasion suddenly become keen and penetrating. He claimed to have some mesmeric powers, of the commoner sort, and had certainly a very attractive manner and address ; of this he was very conscious without being conceited about it. He used to say of himself quite simply, ' People like to have me about them whether sick or well.' This was certainly the case with his brother-in-law and host, Sir Robert, a gentleman of such highly nervous temperament that the good folks, his neighbours, while admitting his many virtues, scarcely knew at times ' what to make of him,' and who was never so much at ease as in Mr. Walcot's company.

And yet, as in most cases of intimate friendship, there was little similarity of character in these two men, except that they both wore the intellectual stamp. Walcot was a tall, strong, though somewhat lean figure, dark as a Spaniard, with a musical but decisive voice ; Sir Robert a small grey man, frail of limb, somewhat weakened as to face, though comely, too, and like a gentleman in presence. He was the senior of his brother-in-law by at least ten years, and looked older yet ; at

times, when excited, his utterance was shrill and rapid, like a very old man's, but more generally it was hesitating, thoughtful, and with that sort of echo in it which may be noticed in the voices of those who concern themselves mainly with the past.

## CHAPTER II.

## A TÊTE-A-TÊTE.

THE two men I have attempted to present to the mind's eye of the reader are sitting together in the great dining-room of the Hall on a certain September evening ; the ladies, that is to say, Lady Arden and her eldest daughter, Evelyn (who, though she is eighteen, and has accordingly 'come out,' still retains her schoolroom name of Evy), have long retired from the dessert table ; and their absence has been, as usual, the signal for producing the cigarette box which lies between the two gentlemen, and within easy reach of either's hand. The table, which is one adapted for a small party, has been laid in the great bay window, so that three fair scenes are presented to them at once ; on one side the avenue, its two straight lines of oak appearing in the far distance to contradict Euclid's definition, by meeting and enclosing a space ; in the centre the bowling-green, of late years desecrated by croquet, but yet retaining—thanks to a grand back ground of those 'green-robed senators, the trees'—most of its venerable air ; and on the third side, a portion of the garden proper, still ablaze with red geraniums, with their blue borders of lobelias.

Sir Robert has his gaze dreamily fixed upon this spot, and Mr. Walcot's eyes, as is common with him, follow those of his companion. They are not engaged in conversation, nor have they spoken for some time, a circumstance which discomposes neither of them ; they are much too intimate with one another not to be able to endure any amount of silence ; but their reflections often run—to some distance at least—in the same groove. The beautiful description of the poet, of two sympathetic minds, whose

Thought leapt out to wed with thought  
Ere thought could wed itself with speech,

was only, however, in part applicable to them. Mr. Walcot



often knew what his host and friend was thinking of, but the reverse of this was not the case. Nor was this to be wondered at, the elder living almost wholly in the past—a past with which the other was more or less acquainted, and the younger concerning himself mainly with the future.

It was curious, however, how very clearly Sir Robert's train of thought was sometimes followed by that of his companion—an instance of which occurred at this moment. Into the garden plot comes a young girl, with a pair of 'La Crosse' sticks and a hoop in her hand; she stands sideways to the bay window, and proceeds, unconscious of spectators, to play the game with some one who stands nearer to the house, and is, therefore, not in sight. The effect is peculiar, since she appears to put herself into a hundred attitudes without any other object than to exhibit her grace and beauty. She is tall and fair, with little natural colour, save the rose tints which the exercise is now giving to her, but her complexion is exquisitely delicate; her long brown hair, tossed back from her face, with each quick movement of her shapely neck, flows well-nigh to her waist; and now and again her bright lips part and a merry laugh breaks out from them, evoked by some blunder of her unseen playmate.

A vision fit to make an old man young.

Sir Robert gazes on it with serene content; Mr. Walcot with a deep-set pleasure that is seldom indeed permitted to reveal itself as at present, but his companion, always unobservant, is now utterly wrapped in his own thoughts. His eyes, however, being presently raised to the top of the tall cedar on the lawn, which sways and swerves as if under the influence of a tornado, though all lesser things in that sheltered spot are calm and well-nigh motionless, he exclaims with anxiety, 'There is a storm at sea.'

'George does not start till Thursday,' returns Mr. Walcot in his measured tones.

He understands at once the connection which has led his companion's thoughts from Miss Evy to his nephew, and the apprehension that has been aroused in his mind.

'He said he should pass through Paris, and might be a day

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or two late, or a day or two earlier,' continued Sir Robert nervously.

'To-day is but Monday, however, Arden. Moreover this storm would not affect ships upon that route—it is to the last degree unlikely he would come by Bristol.'

'Why!' inquired the other quickly, yet without testiness; he was willing to be convinced.

'Because it is the cheap route.'

Sir Robert laughed good-humouredly.

'Well, George is not very economical, that is true, but what does it matter?—when I am gone there will be enough for everybody, himself included. Did I ever tell you how the dog answered me at Heidelberg, when I rated him for his extravagance, and told him at his age I should not have dreamt of running into such expenses. "Ah," he said, "but you had no rich old uncle as I have." One cannot help liking a frank lad like that—you allow he is frank, don't you?'

'I did not say anything to the contrary, did I?'

'No, but you did not speak, and with you silence does not always mean consent.'

'It means, in this case, disinclination to differ, Arden,' answered the other softly. 'I like your nephew; you are as fortunate, it seems to me, in your one blood relation as any man can expect to be; but when you speak of him as though his chief virtue was frankness—there—well, I must be excused for remaining silent.'

'Ferdinand, pray be more explicit,' exclaimed Sir Robert. 'How can you, with your eyes upon that pure girl destined for his bride, treat his hypocrisy—if he has been a hypocrite—so lightly? If he has deceived *me*, may he not deceive *her*?'

'He has certainly deceived *you*,' put in the other, quietly; 'but a young man need not be rendered an outcast for a mere venial crime. I should not even have thought of mentioning it had you not been so importunate for the proof of his guilt.' Here Mr. Walcot's swift intelligence had a little forestalled matters; for there had been no importunity such as he had described as yet.

'Of course I require the proof,' said Sir Robert, falling into the other's groove that had been thus cut for him. 'I should not dream of condemning George unheard.'

'It is not a question of condemnation, I hope, nor even of reprobation,' answered Mr. Walcot. 'But, since you speak of your nephew's frankness, I will tell you what I saw him do at Homburg, the very day before we left him. Do you remember finding him in the Saloon there, contrary to your express injunctions?'

'I remember forbidding him to play, but not, I think, to enter the gambling room. Otherwise, I should have been annoyed to find him there as I did, standing by the *trente et quarante* table. I remember the circumstance, now you mention it, perfectly.'

'You caused him to lose about forty pounds that morning.'

'I? How could that be? He never played; and, besides, he came away with us.'

'Yes, but he had been playing. He drew back from the table as you entered, and left his stake upon it on the red. The red turned up four times while you were speaking to him, yet he did not dare to take up his gains. At last, as was certain to be the case, he saw them swept away before his eyes. To see him listening, with apparent seriousness, to all your good advice against gaming, while his eyes were fixed upon the cards, and his thoughts occupied with the idea of how he was wasting his good luck, was as good as a comedy.'

'It seems to me to have been a very bad piece of taste, to say the least of it, and nothing laughable about it,' observed Sir Robert, gravely.

'You are too serious-minded, Arden; your own feelings of honour are too delicate; and, besides, you must remember George is but a boy.'

'He is old enough to think of taking the responsibility of another's happiness upon his own shoulders,' answered the other; 'it is useless for you to make excuses for him, though I respect the motive which prompts you to do so. Still, even you may have been mistaken. I will tax the lad with it with my own lips, and see what he has to say for himself.'

'No, Arden, you must not do that,' answered Walcot, quietly. 'The fact is, I have myself been guilty of a breach of confidence in the matter. I perceived George's error, for it was but that at most—and reproached him with it. He

did not attempt to deny it, but he promised amendment for the future. Under these circumstances I am afraid that it was tacitly understood between us that I should not mention the matter to your ears.'

'Then I am very sorry you did,' said Sir Robert, in tones of deep annoyance.

'And so am I, Arden. I have done amiss; my desire that your charity—I mean, of course, your kindness of heart—should not be imposed upon has carried me too far. Of course you can tax George with this peccadillo; he will confess to it without much remorse, if I am not mistaken in his character; but he will look upon me, and with reason, as having in a manner betrayed him—he will hold me henceforth as his enemy—'

'Nay, he will not do that, Ferdinand,' interrupted the other. 'No one shall ever do that in my house. Let bygones be bygones. He shall never know that I know aught about it, although it gives me pain to think of George as otherwise than truthful. I had thought him as open-hearted as he certainly is open-handed.'

'Without doubt he is that, Arden, though, having no money of his own, one can hardly put it down to his credit. He has other virtues, however, I make no question.'

'You have saddened me, Ferdinand,' said Sir Robert, after a pause.

Mr. Walcot raised his shoulders and smiled sadly. It was evident that he had said all he had to say, and was sorry that it had been so much. There was a long silence. The baronet rose and went slowly to the window; the girl had left the garden, and the light of the moon was on the trees, the tops of which rocked and vibrated more than ever.

'There is a terrible storm at sea, I am sure, Walcot. Hush—is that thunder?'

'No, it is a minute gun.' As he spoke the door opened, and in ran a fair-faced, blue-eyed lad of about nine years old.

'Oh, Papa! oh, Mr. Walcot! There is a shipwreck off the Point!'

The boy's words were significant of much. He had called Sir Robert, who was but his step-father, Papa, as indeed he

might well do in return for much loving treatment: and he had then addressed himself to Mr. Walcot, as being the master of the house *de facto* if not *de jure*, and the person to be appealed to in every emergency. The flushed face and glowing eyes of the speaker betrayed intense excitement.

'If there is a shipwreck there is danger to some poor souls, Frank,' said Sir Robert, reprovingly. 'You should be sorry rather than pleased at such a catastrophe.'

'Oh, but indeed, Papa, I am sorry, only——'

'Only we young people are a little thoughtless, eh,' put in Mr. Walcot. 'We are apt only to think of ourselves, even though what is fun to us (as in the case of the fable of the Frogs) may be death to others.'

'Don't let us say "Death,"' said Sir Robert, gently. 'And if it be so, how can the young picture it to themselves? We are not angry with *you*, my boy. If there was any one on board that unhappy ship in which you had any interest or connection you would feel sorry enough I know—— You smile, Ferdinand. What is it?'

'Oh, nothing; I was only smiling at human nature. As it happens there *is*, in all human probability, on board this very ship some one connected with our young friend; but then it is not likely to be a pleasant connection. Lady Arden expects the new governess from Bristol to-morrow. She should arrive there from the Continent by sea to-night.'

'Good heavens, I had forgotten that, but so, of course, had Frank; else his conduct would have been heartless indeed.'

Again Mr. Walcot shrugged his shoulders and smiled his pitying smile.

'You expect too much of poor Humanity,' he said; 'you have been taught to look for too much.'

'That is true, indeed,' said Sir Robert, with a deep sigh. 'There was no one like my Madeline for thinking of others, nor ever will be.' He sat down in his chair again, as though quite forgetful of his intention to go out, and covered his face in his hands. The thud of another storm-gun broke the silence, and once more roused him to a sense of the occasion. 'Come,' said he, 'let us do what we can; it is well to remember the dead, but we must not forget the living.'

## CHAPTER III.

## FROM THE QUAY.

WHEN the two men entered the hall for their coats and wraps they found all the rest of the family about to start on the same exciting errand—that is, all the able-bodied ones, which did not include ‘Baba’ Nicoll (aged three and a half) nor Lady Arden herself, who never trusted herself to the tender mercies of the night air (in the country), and objected to all excitements (such as shipwrecks) which were not of a strictly fashionable kind. Notwithstanding her thick Ulster and hard cap, and the great fur scarf that was wound round her shapely neck, Evelyn looked distractingly lovely, as she would have equally done in the shovel hat of a bishop or a coalheaver, for her beauty was such that attire did not so much become her as she it. Cousin George, as she called him (though, of course, they were not relations), used to admire her most in the rough costume that the wind and weather of Halcombe necessitated, and had dubbed her (almost everybody at the Hall had a nickname) ‘the Fair Smuggler.’

Milly Nicoll (her real name of Millicent was absolutely forgotten—the only record of it being at the Register Office in Marylebone Church, where she had been christened) was two years junior to Evy, and therefore but one year beyond the age described by the poet as ‘bashful fifteen.’ But no one but a poet could have called her ‘bashful.’ She was about to become so, it is true—‘Tomboys’ always do so in due time—but for the present she was like an untamed colt, shaggy as to her hair, which was of a deeper brown than her sister’s; wild, though tender, as to her hazel eyes; and as to her limbs a very tarantula. Yet, strange to say, in that perpetual motion of theirs, there was never a false concord—the least awkwardness.

She had equipped herself, on this occasion, in a pea-jacket

of Cousin George's, and with her sailor hat, and ever twinkling legs, looked like that marine young person whose gallant conduct under the fire was rewarded, as the bard informs us, by the First Lieutenanship of the gallant *Thunderbomb*. Curiously enough, that ballad was Milly's favourite poem (indeed the only one she cared about), and those stirring lines

Which, when the Captain came for to hear of it,  
Very much applauded what she'd done,

were frequently on her lips.

Frank himself, with his delicate, eager face, and large, soft, restless eyes, scarcely looked more like a sailor boy than his two sisters, which was the cause of much domestic 'chaff.' He had what others beside his mother termed a 'heavenly temper,' but the way to ruffle it was to 'call him out of his name,' to address him in place of Frank or Franky as Finella, or still worse, by its contraction 'Nellie.' He would bear it from the godfather who gave it him (Cousin George), but from no one else; though oddly enough the first syllable of it, euphonised to 'Fifi,' was an address to which the young fellow would answer with greatest docility.

It is not to be seriously contended, of course, that these three young people were starting out upon a rescue expedition; but nevertheless each was provided with something or other—if it was but a flask of brandy—that might be of use to some half-drowned wretch if opportunity arose; and if their eagerness had something of delight in it all genuine students of human nature will forgive them. They were looking on no 'sinking ship and praying hands,' it must be remembered, but only going vaguely forth on an errand of high excitement, and of which, as it happened, they had had no previous experience. It was curious and very striking to remark the comparative calmness of the air while the little party crossed the lawn and made their way up the terrace at the back of the Hall, and then to compare it with the fury of the blast that met them on the hill-top. It had blown in the door that led through the garden wall into the churchyard, and was streaming through the aperture like pent up waters through a suddenly discovered channel. 'Fifi,' who was first, went down before it, as though it had been a

volley of musketry, and he the first stormer in the breach. The two girls only saved each other by an involuntary embrace and a flank movement (very hurried and confused) behind the sheltering wall. Then Sir Robert moved forward, throwing a word of raillery to the young ladies, upon their pusillanimous conduct. His fate would have been the worst of the four, for the wind whisked him off his legs, and would have lain him as prone as Frank, without that young gentleman's ability to pick himself up again, had not a strong arm linked itself with his at the critical moment.

'Union is strength, and a twofold man is not easily withstood,' said Walcot in his ear as he landed him on the right side of the wall, and with his back to it. It was characteristic of the man to imply that the other was giving him aid in return for his own, instead of being, as he really was, an additional burthen. Frank came after them with a rush, and was instantly flattened against the wall by his step-father's side, like a small placard beside a large one.

Then Mr. Walcot went back for the ladies; Milly at once seized him by the coat-tails and hung on, and with head depressed and body bent he charged the pass and brought her through triumphantly.

In view of her success Evelyn would, perhaps, have adopted the same simple plan, but Mr. Walcot did not give her the opportunity: doubtless, being a great stickler for the proprieties, he thought it indecorous; he took her left hand in his, and with his right arm round her waist, bore her steadily, if somewhat slowly, through the breach. This Thermopylæ of the winds being thus carried, progress, though very difficult, became possible; the church itself afforded the little party some oblique protection, as they made their way through its God's Acre. This spot would, to a stranger's eyes—who did not happen to have a tornado blowing into them—have afforded a curious spectacle. There were but a few homely graves in it; but one corner of it was devoted to the reception of the bodies of poor shipwrecked souls who had been from time to time cast ashore on the rocks below. To these it could hardly have been expected that the parish should supply gravestones; but pious hands had done what they could. Large sea shells were laid



on every swelling mound to mark the fate of him who lay beneath it; and in some cases the figure-heads of the lost vessels had been set up by way of monument. One of these, the bust of a young person without raiment, the *Erin*, of Bristol, stood out from the sacred soil in a manner which, by moonlight, had a very startling effect, and had once frightened a new curate almost out of his wits; his ideas (running in a Scriptural direction) having led him to imagine that she was anticipating the Resurrection Day.

It seemed wonderful, indeed, with that tempest howling and roaring over the long grasses of the graves, that the dead themselves could lie so quietly; for all the powers of the air were abroad that night and working their wild will on earth and sea and sky. The moon was at the full, but was only visible by fits, when the hurrying masses of grey clouds left her pale face clear at intervals of unequal duration. A great master of word-painting has described the wind as coming into 'a rocking town and stabbing all things up and down;' but to no town-dweller can be conveyed an adequate conception of the force and fury of that element as it rages on such a coast as that which lies around Halcombe Point. The very land seemed to shudder as it swept across it; the sea grew livid under its ceaseless scourging. As far as the eye could reach, from the hill above the Point, was a world of wild, white waters, the foam of which was dashed upwards in sheets fathoms high, and carried inland in sharp sleet.

On this white surface there was but one object, from which ever and anon there flashed a jet of flame, succeeded by a dull thud—a hoarse cry for help that it lay not in human power to give; it looked, and was, but a black, inert mass, a broken plaything, of which the storm had not yet tired; but it had been an hour ago a gallant steamship, prompt to obey its master, man. The wind was now the only power it acknowledged, and it was being driven before it at headlong speed towards the Point. The little party, huddled together for foothold, gazed on this spectacle with awestruck eyes.

'Poor souls, poor souls,' cried Sir Robert. 'Good God, can nothing be done?'



'Nothing,' answered Walcot, gravely. 'She will go to pieces when she touches the rocks.'

'Thank heaven, here is Mr. Dyneley, with some men,' ejaculated Evy, looking back.

'Mr. Dyneley is a clergyman, Miss Evelyn,' answered Walcot, with the least touch of scorn; 'but he cannot work miracles.'

'He has, however, brought the mortar apparatus,' observed Milly, naively.

And, indeed, as the tall, brown-bearded curate drew nigh, they could see that he was followed by half-a-dozen stalwart men, who dragged behind them the implement in question.

'A sad sight, Sir Robert,' bawled the curate (for indeed every one spoke at the full stretch of their lungs); 'but if the ladies can bear to look at it you had better bring them down to the mill.'

This was the saw mill, of which we have already spoken, built upon the very edge of the harbour, and the only place for miles upon the coast in which on such a night shelter could be found.

'You are always right, Dyneley,' said Sir Robert, approvingly; 'do you take charge of one of the girls.'

With a diffident, hesitating air that contrasted rather comically with his stature and proportions, the young curate was about to offer his arm to Evy, but Mr. Walcot, who stood beside her, was quicker in his movements, and took possession of that young lady, leaving her sister to fall to the other's share.

Thus they moved down the hill together to the mill, from the windows of which could be obtained almost as good a view of the driving ship as from the hill itself, but, nevertheless, such was the excitement of the little party, that they preferred to stand outside, sheltered only in a very moderate degree by the low stone wall of the quay.

The vessel, we have said, was approaching the Point rapidly, but not in a direct line; it was possible that she might just skirt it, and go ashore a few score yards beyond. In this case her destruction would not be so immediate, but, on the other hand, the life-lines could hardly be shot over from the apparatus. The curate and his men, however, had everything in

readiness ; you would have said, to judge by their resolute and earnest faces as they stood beside the mortar, that they were about to defend their native soil against the attack of a foe. Mr. Walcot, too, faced the cruel blast with stern eyes and knitted brow, except when he dropped a word of exhortation to be of good courage to Evy ; but Sir Robert and the young people wore looks of fear and pity, and more than one of them already repented that they had come out with a light heart to behold so sad a scene.

‘Do you know the ship?’ asked the curate of the man beside him. He himself had been on the coast for years, but to his landsman’s eyes the shattered mass before him was but a black and shapeless mass.

‘It is the *Rhineland*,’ answered the other, confidently, ‘the steamer that plies between Rotterdam and Bristol.’

‘You may say “that used to ply,”’ put in another—it was John Jenkins, parish clerk, who plumed himself on employing terms of accuracy—‘for she will never make another voyage.’

‘Do you hear *that*, Mr. Walcot?’ exclaimed Evelyn, in terrified accents, ‘it is the *Rhineland*; that is the boat that poor Miss Hurt is to come by.’

‘*Was* to come by,’ murmured Mr. Jenkins, fortunately beneath his ordinary ecclesiastical tones, so that the amendment was inaudible.

The huge hull came flying on, like some mighty sea-bird on a broken wing, for whose discordant screams the shrieking of the wind might easily have been taken ; her mainmast and rigging could now be clearly seen standing out against the moonlight ; without a rag of sail or puff of steam, her ghastly and spectral form was hurrying on, when her headlong course was suddenly arrested ; the crash of rending timber was mingled for an instant with the roaring of the storm, and a white shroud of foam enveloped her and hid her from sight.

‘God of Heaven, she has foundered?’ exclaimed Sir Robert. The two girls uttered a scream of anguish.

‘Nay, I still see her,’ cried the curate, eagerly.

‘She is on the *Lancet*, sir,’ said a coastguardsman. ‘The wind must have shifted a point to have took her there.’

The *Lancet* was a long sharp line of rocks, about two hun-

dred yards from shore, but quite disconnected with it, the waves always covered it, but at low tide—which was now the case—only a few inches.

The hull looked considerably higher now than she had been in the water, the wind and waves having probably carried her bodily on to the ledge; nevertheless, in her stationary position, the sea, climbing and raging about her at its will, seemed to devour her more completely even than before.

'Is the position altered for the better by this, Marley?' inquired the curate, anxiously.

'She may hold together now for a few hours,' answered the coastguardsman; 'but she will go to pieces at the flow.' He was an old sailor, and his mind was fixed on the fate of the ship rather than on those it carried.

'I mean as respects the poor souls on board, man,' continued the curate, with some asperity.

'In my opinion nothing can save them, sir. If the men at Archester have already put out the lifeboat, it is possible they may be here in time; but not otherwise.'

'But is it not probable they have done so?'

'No, sir; they must have known from its position (judging from the sound of the guns) that the ship would be ashore hours before they could reach her; and of course they did not take into account the chance of her grounding on the Lancet.'

'A swift horse, even with this wind across him, would reach Archester in an hour,' soliloquised the curate. 'I am a heavy weight; but then I know how to ride, which these men don't.—Might I take your bay mare, Sir Robert?'

'Of course, my dear fellow; and don't spare her. Ten pounds a piece from me, mind, to every man who mans the lifeboat, but don't volunteer yourself, Dyneley; Halcombe can't spare you.'

The compliment was lost on him for whom it was intended, for the curate was already on the slope of the hill.

'He's a rare good plucked one,' observed Mr. Jenkins, approvingly, and allus was.'

'Especially at the University,' muttered Mr. Walcot, not so low, however, but that Evy, who was still his close companion, could catch the sneer.

'I can now stand by myself quite well,' said she, withdrawing her arm. The tone was as unmistakable as the action, and signified not only mere disapproval, but disgust.

'A thousand pardons, Miss Evy; I did not intend my little joke to be overheard.'

'I don't think this is a time for jokes, Mr. Walcot.'

'Or rather, Miss Evy,' returned the other, tartly, 'do you not mean that Mr. Dyneley is not a fit subject for them. I had forgotten that a certain Divinity doth hedge a curate in some people's eyes.'

'When he is doing God's work, I think it does so,' answered Evelyn, sharply. 'You are always trying to turn Mr. Dyneley into ridicule.'

'I am very sorry; I had no idea he was under your particular protection; of course if it had been George, I should have known better than in your presence to have taken such a liberty with him. You are his natural defender; but in Dyneley's case I had no idea——'

She turned away from him with a face of scarlet, and fixed her eyes upon the wreck, as it could now in truth be called. Yet for the moment she was not thinking of the vessel, nor even of its unhappy crew. She was full of pity for them, but a still deeper feeling than pity had been stirred within her.

'I think I see figures upon the rigging,' observed Sir Robert, anxiously. 'Is it not so, Marley?'

'Yes, sir; the sea has found its way into the hull, and some poor souls have taken to the shrouds.'

'To the shrouds!' murmured little Frank, trembling with awe. He knew that shrouds and death were somehow associated.

'Yes, my boy,' said Sir Robert, kindly. 'They will thus, for the time, be out of the reach of the waves, and let us trust that they will be able to hold on there till help arrives.'

Mr. Marley shook his head with a grunt. It was his manner of expressing disagreement with the baronet's opinion. They might hold on indeed up in the cross-trees and elsewhere for an indefinite time, but it was not possible, he meant to imply, that the ship could hold together.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE NIGHT WATCH.

THE storm had abated nothing of its ferocity, yet none of the party at the Point thought of going home. It seemed to all of them, though they could do nothing in the way of help, that it was a forsaking of these poor drowning creatures to quit their post. But the Hall folks did leave the quay and withdraw into the mill, from the windows of which they continued to watch the doomed vessel.

'Was not this poor Miss Hurt,' asked Sir Robert of Mr. Walcot, 'to have come to us last month instead of now?' The baronet knew almost nothing of the domestic arrangements at the Hall, which were effected without any consultation with him by his wife—not, however, without some indirect assistance from Mr. Walcot. He never 'meddled,' but her ladyship, who was of an indolent disposition, had always the advantage of his advice, and to say truth it was generally valuable. Mr. Walcot hastened to explain.

'No, Arden, you are confusing Miss Hurt, the German governess, with Annabel Spruce, who, but for some indisposition, was to have come last month to be the young ladies' maid.'

'Oh, yes; I remember my wife said you had recommended her.'

'Nay, it was not quite that. The young person was spoken of very highly by a common friend of ours; indeed I think she mentioned her to Lady Arden first. I never set eyes on her but once in my life; but her story touched me, and would have touched you, with your tender susceptibilities, even more. You remember the Swintons who lived at Makerly Hall; our dear Madeline used to rather like them, you know.'

'Did she?' he sighed. 'I had forgotten—and yet I thought I had forgotten nothing in connection with her. Yes, I remember the name of Swinton. This girl, then, was in service with the family.'

'Oh, no; it is a much stranger history. The old man had a son who died at college, and after his death it was found that he had left an illegitimate child. This was Annabel Spruce. His mother was anxious to adopt her, but the old man would not hear of it.'

'Dear, dear,' said Sir Robert. 'It was a difficult case as to morals, but I hope he was not hard upon her.'

'Well, something was done for the child; but Mrs. Swinton died first, and her wishes were no longer attended to.'

'That was abominable,' exclaimed Sir Robert. 'The wishes of the dead ought to be sacred.'

'Of course, that is your view, Arden: but all men are not cast in the same mould. This girl, then, fatherless, and, as it happened, not perhaps so unfortunately, motherless also, was left utterly unprovided for at her grandfather's death. A friend of Lady Arden's did what she could for her—put her in service and so on; but she is now out of place. She has the highest character from her employers. There is nothing against her except the misfortune of her birth; and I judged that that would not be an objection in your eyes.'

'You judged well, Walcot; and my wife also—it was the more creditable in her, however, being a woman.'

'Ah, you know human nature, Arden. It is, as you say, to Lady Arden's credit that this poor girl is her *protégée*. But it is as well that the circumstances of the case should be kept to ourselves.'

'Certainly; though it behoves those who know them to be all the kinder to the girl on that account—— Do you know anything of this poor Miss Hurt?'

'Nothing whatever, except that she, too, is an orphan girl, highly accomplished, I believe, who has been recommended to Lady Arden by a German friend.'

'I fear she will never touch English soil,' said Sir Robert, glancing at the foam-covered wreck.

'I fear not; still if she is doomed to meet with so unhappy a fate I had rather it happened now, while she is unknown to us, than after she had been under your roof.'

'Our sorrow would be more personal, of course, in that case.'

'Yes; but I was thinking of Annette Roy. She was poor

Madeline's governess, you know ; the one that was lost on her passage to Havre, with her father, at Christmas time. Did she never tell you about it ?

' Yes, yes ; but my memory is not what it was. I remember it but very dimly.' He spoke with a nervous eagerness un-called for, as it seemed, by the occasion. ' What was it ?'

' Well, it was a strange story ; this Annette was an old-fashioned little woman, who dressed in a mob-cap, and looked like a buy-a-broom girl. She was very particular about all her little possessions, and when she went away that Christmas left a huge box in one of the attics with a written notice on it that it was not to be opened till her return. She never did return, and her father, who was drowned with her, was the only representative she had in the world ; so the question was, What was to be done with the box ? However, nothing was done. It lay untouched for a year, until a certain bill for her happened to come in from some tradesman by whom it had been forgotten ; when it seemed only reasonable that this should be discharged by the sale of her effects. On the day that my father had come to this decision one of the maids who had only been with us a few months ran down to him, half-frightened out of her wits, to say that there was a strange woman in the attic. She said " she stared at her like a dead creature, and had a baggy lace cap on."'

' Yes, yes,' said Sir Robert, ' I remember it all now ; my poor Madeline saw the figure herself.'

' Well, she thought she saw it,' replied Mr. Walcot ; ' I am slow to believe such stories. Still occurrences of that kind are disagreeable in a house ; and whether they occur or not they are easily imagined. That is why I said I am glad for your sake that this was poor Miss Hurt's first voyage rather than her second. When any inmate of a house comes to a violent end superstitious ideas are always suggested.'

' I would prefer to say that spiritual conditions are likely to be induced, Walcot,' answered the other, gravely. ' If, for instance, instead of my sweet Madeline having expired tranquilly in my arms, such a fate as that of yonder poor creature had overtaken her, I should, I know, have been haunted by her dripping form, her fair hair dragged in the brine—pshaw ! I tremble to think of it.'



There was a look of horror on Sir Robert's face at least as marked as that which the spectacle of the shipwreck had at first evoked on it; it was curious under such circumstances that Mr. Walcot should have pursued the subject; but perhaps he thought the opportunity for the administration of a little pure reason was not to be thrown away. His silence might have seemed too like adhesion to the other's fantastic views.

'I think you should say, Arden, that, in the case you put, you would have imagined yourself to be so haunted. When the feelings are deeply moved the imagination becomes a slave to them.'

'One is obliged to believe the evidence of one's own senses,' answered Sir Robert gloomily.

'I do not see the necessity. Moreover, some of our senses are more liable to deception than others.'

Sir Robert waved his hand with a deprecatory air. 'I know what you are hinting at, Walcot, and appreciate your good intentions. It is no use arguing the matter, and especially'—here he threw a glance at the young people, who were crowded at the other window—'since we are not alone. It is enough for me that I know what I know.'

Mr. Walcot uttered a sympathising sigh, and was silent. Nothing was heard in the almost empty chamber—the only room the Mill afforded not used for the purposes of trade—but the roaring of the wind and the rattling of the window frames. The minute guns of the ship had long ceased to fire, and, indeed, so far as matters could be made out, the sea had made a clean sweep of her.

Presently there was a knock at the door, and a short, thick-set man, with a shawl wound about his neck, presented himself. He held his cap in his hand, and thereby displayed a head covered with red stubble mingled with grey.

'The mistress says,' observed he in a strong north-country accent, 'that it is very late for the young ladies and the bairn to be out of doors, and the sooner they gang hame the better.'

Sir Robert looked displeased. This gardener's rough manner always annoyed him, for that very reason he passed over certain misdemeanors in the man—especially a fondness for



nips of whiskey at premature hours—lest he should act harshly towards him through prejudice.

‘That was not her ladyship’s own message, Groad,’ remarked Mr. Walcot, severely.

‘Well, no, sir,’ the man’s voice took a more respectful tone at once, though it was far from deferential, ‘I took the mistress’s order from Mr. Beamish.’

‘And why didn’t Beamish bring the message himself?’

‘Because all the breath was out of his body before he got to the kirkyard wall, sir,’ grinned the gardener. ‘He was blowed down flat—or at leastways as flat as his shape permitted—by the wind in the wicket gap.’

‘Oh, papa dear, *don’t* send us home,’ pleaded Frank, removing for an instant his sharp thin face from the window pane to which it was glued in rapt excitement. ‘I do so want to see the life-boat come.’

‘And I,’ echoed Milley, ‘I am sure I could never get a wink of sleep till I knew what is to become of those poor creatures yonder.’

‘You can know that, missie, by just putting a word to any coastguardsman,’ observed Groad slowly; ‘they all say as they’ll be drowned.’

‘If it is God’s will, man, it will be so, and not otherwise,’ exclaimed Sir Robert, reprovingly. ‘What do you think, Walcot, about the young people going home?’

Before Mr. Walcot could reply Evelyn interposed. ‘Of course, if mamma wishes it we will go home, but she does not understand that we are in shelter here; and I do think that neither Milly nor Frank will get much rest till they know what happens to these poor people. Baba was sound asleep when I came away, so that we have only ourselves to look after.’

‘It will be a good many hours,’ said Sir Robert, doubtfully, and looking at Mr. Walcot.

‘Still, as Miss Evelyn says,’ replied the latter gentleman, ‘the young folks are too excited to go to sleep. And if they could get refreshments—’ Here the door opened again, and admitted a good-looking young fellow bearing a small hamper on his shoulders.

I have brought some bread and butter and things from the

farm,' said the new comer, 'which Mr. Dyneley sent down, Sir Robert, with his compliments; and he says if a bit of fire was lit here he thinks a cup of tea might be of advantage to the young ladies.'

'That is the very thing,' said Sir Robert; 'now the garrison is victualled for the night. Thank you, Gilbert, it was very thoughtful of Mr. Dyneley, very.'

'Well, yes, sir: and he hadn't much time to think of anything either. I met him coming to the Hall stables, and saw him start off on the mare like a flash of lightning. She'll take him to Archester if four legs can do it, but the wind is mad upon the moors to-night and that's the truth.'

'Get some sticks, Groat, and light the fire,' said Mr. Walcot, in a more authoritative voice than he was accustomed to use, even out of Sir Robert's presence. He was a little annoyed, perhaps, by the forethought which the curate had exhibited in sending supplies from his own lodging at the Manor Farm.

John Groat obeyed, though with a very ill grace; lighting fires, except in a hot-house, being, as he considered, an operation exceedingly derogatory in a head gardener at eighty pounds a year. He brought the sticks, 'as cross as two of them,' as Gilbert Holm afterwards observed, and even produced a kettle and coals. In a few minutes the apartment lost much of its cheerless aspect, and Master Frank found his attention divided between the shipwreck and an impromptu repast. Their exposure to the wind had given him and Milly a vigorous appetite, but the others only took a cup of tea.

'How I wish,' sighed Evy, 'I could give a draught of this to those poor shuddering souls upon the wreck; it seems quite shocking to be warm and have no wants, while they are perishing yonder of wet and cold.'

'Tea would do them little good I fear, Miss Evelyn,' said Mr. Walcot. 'They are past that by this time. There is plenty of brandy for them on the quay, however, if they ever reach it.'

'May it please God that they may,' observed Evelyn, fervently.

Sir Robert said nothing; his eyes were fixed upon the case-ment, but his finger was raised mechanically, as if for silence.

'What is it, Arden?' inquired Mr. Walcot in a whisper.

'She is speaking to me,' replied he, in the same under tone.  
'I heard her say, "Robert, Robert."'

'You mean you imagined you did; pray remember we are not alone.'

'Yes, yes: that makes no matter to her, however. It was a more cheerful voice than usual, Walcot. It seemed to say, "Be of good courage." I believe these people will be saved.'

## CHAPTER V.

## A TIPP.

HOW few even of so-called educated persons, who trust themselves every day to the risks of a railway journey, have any intelligent reason for the faith that is in them. What the ordinary traveller knows of steam-power, or the method by which it acts, is next to nothing; and it is doubtful whether he is even acquainted with the means by which his carriage is kept (when it is kept) from going off the line. It is quite as well, perhaps, that this blissful ignorance exists, of the opinion once expressed to me by one of the most eminent of our railway engineers is a correct one. 'If the public only knew,' said he, 'the risks they run, especially the "shaves" which take place in every railway journey of any length that they undertake, they would stay at home, or set up the coaches again.' And if such is the ignorance of our land travellers, how much greater is that of our voyagers by sea, the whole confiding class that is included in the head 'Passenger.'

It was a type of this class, rather than an exception to it, that Thomas Hood alluded to, in the lady who, being in a vessel which the winds and waves were hurrying to its doom, exhibited such courage and high spirits because she had the Captain's own assurance that 'they were going on shore.'

When the good ship *Rhineland* started from Rotterdam for Bristol on what turned out to be her last voyage, the weather was what seamen term 'dirty;' but it was not for those who had paid the very moderate passage money demanded of them to inquire whether that phrase did not, in this particular case at least, mean 'dangerous.' They could not be expected to understand that when a large consignment of cattle are eating their heads off at a shipowner's expense, a vessel puts to sea in weather that, under other circumstances, would keep her in port, or even that the presence of cattle on the deck of a

steamer does not tend to increase its seaworthiness. Except those unhappy persons who never go to sea at all without a presentiment that they shall be drowned, and behold in every wave the instrument of their destruction, the passengers by the *Rhineland* were without misgivings. Those subject to seasickness at once fled to their berths to hide their agonies from the public gaze, and the others repaired to the saloon—the sofas of which rocked like cradles—or secured themselves in such shelter as they could find upon the deck, to snatch a fearful joy from the contemplation of the work of a south-easter.

Among these latter were two persons, with one of whom, Elise Hurt, we are acquainted by name. She is a girl of eighteen years of age or so, of graceful figure, and a face, which, if not beautiful, according to our English notions, is, at least, eminently pleasing. She is tall and fair, and, well, yes, plump. No other word exactly expresses that particular contour, which, however, it may err in years to come on the side of stoutness, is for the present all that can be desired in the way of shapeliness, and no more. Her hair is of a light auburn, and very plentiful; her eyes, of tender blue, are large and thoughtful, and their long lashes droop over them in a manner which Solomon (who was a good judge of such matters) evidently appreciated; he talks of a lady 'taking' one with her eyelids; and this is what Elise Hurt's eyelids did. They took you, or 'fetched' you, as we moderns express it, in spite of all resistance.

The young Englishman by her side upon the deck has, however, made no resistance at all, and to judge by the expression of his bronzed and handsome face, as he arranges his railway rug about her shoulders, he hugs the chain that has enslaved him. His arrangements for her comfort are complete enough, yet he always seems to imagine that something is wanting; and his solicitude appears to somewhat embarrass her. She explains to him in the German tongue, which he perfectly understands, that she is quite comfortable; and also informs him in a natural and simple way that she is unaccustomed to such kind attentions.

'You will quite spoil me, sir,' she says, 'if you take so

much trouble about me, who am not only used to look after myself, but must always do so.'

'You don't know how to take care of your own money,' says he with a good-natured smile, that becomes his olive face exceedingly.

'That is true—or at least it was so on one occasion. If you had not picked up my little purse in the church yesterday, or if it had fallen into bad hands, it would have been a great misfortune to me—nay, a catastrophe.'

'I did not know I had averted a catastrophe,' replied the young man. 'But it was surely imprudent of you to carry so much money about in your pocket.'

"So much money" was only a few pounds, sir; but then you see it was all I had.'

The young gentleman's eyes grew very pitiful. He had a kind heart, which was always sorry for poor people; but it was especially sorry for this particular victim of poverty. It seemed so hard that one so young and so beautiful should be so poor.

'But had you no friend in Rotterdam?'

'No; my aunt—who is my only friend to call such—lives at Heidelberg. My money must last me for many months, though, indeed,' she added, with a smile, 'if all goes well, I expect to make more in England, and to return home quite rich.'

'And how is it, if I may make so bold, that you propose to acquire this fortune?'

'I am engaged as a governess in the house of a rich English family. A friend of my aunt's was so good as to recommend me, though I have never been out before.'

'Poor thing,' ejaculated the young man in English. She laughed aloud.

'Take care what you say,' said she; 'I have been learning your language—though it is expressly enjoined on me that I am not to speak it—to some purpose. I do not consider myself a "poor thing" at all, I do assure you, but a very lucky girl.'

'Lucky! What, to be leaving your only friend, and your native land, for a strange country, and a stranger's roof. It seems to me you are thankful for small mercies. If your case were mine I know I should think it a very hard one.'

'I hope not; for, in the first place, you see, I am no longer

## UNDER ONE ROOF.

an encumbrance to my aunt, who has pinched herself for my sake. Then the lady I am going to, I am assured, is kind, as indeed I gather from her letter. My salary is a better one than I could expect. I like teaching young people, too; and it is a great thing when duty and inclination go together.'

'Is it?—No doubt it is—of course,' added the young man, hastily; for he saw that his *naïve* rejoinder had somewhat shocked his companion. 'You see, unfortunately, I have no duties. Life has been made very easy for me.'

'Still, I should think you would be happier if you made some object for yourself in life.'

'I am not sure; I am happy enough—or at least I used to be so. I used to feel that I had all that I wanted. And then I am so incurably indolent.'

'To know one's faults is half-way, they say, towards remedying them,' observed the girl, in cheerful tones!

'Not in my case. For example, I was as nearly as possible late for the packet this morning, notwithstanding that I had a very particular reason for coming by it.'

'Ah, then, you have more important matters on hand after all, it seems, than you would wish me to believe.'

'I have no objection your knowing about this particular one—the reason why I wanted to come by the *Rhineland*. It was because I heard you say that you were going by it.'

'Sir, I do not think it is right,' said the girl, with quiet dignity, 'that you should say such things to me. Such idle compliments may please young ladies in your own rank of life. To one in mine they are quite inappropriate, and, I must add, in my own particular case, distasteful.'

'Good Heavens!' ejaculated the object of this censure. 'It was unnecessary for you to say that. I could see that I had made a fool of myself before you opened your mouth. I am constantly doing that, however——'

'With young ladies whom you meet accidentally in foreign churches?' put in the other, gravely.

'No; there, upon my honour, you wrong me. I speak thoughtlessly, I know, out of the fulness of my heart; but I am no philanderer—what do you call it in German—a *male flirt*. I despise such a character; and I should still more despise the



man who, taking advantage of having performed a trifling service to an unprotected young lady to win her confidence, should venture to breathe a syllable to her that should be "distasteful."

The young fellow spoke with fluency enough, but with earnestness also; there was no glibness about his tone; it was plain to see that he had been very much moved and hurt by the suggestion that he had behaved improperly.

'I am quite sure that you did not intend any rudeness,' said the young lady, gently.

'I hope not, Miss Hurt. I trust that I am at least a gentleman. What annoys me, however, is that you, of all people, should have supposed me capable of such misconduct. I trust I am saying nothing "distasteful" in avowing that your good opinion is of great consequence to me.'

'I can hardly understand how that can be,' was the quiet reply, 'since you never saw me before yesterday, and we are only acquainted with each other's names, Mr. Gresham.'

'I cannot understand it either,' replied he, quickly; 'I only know it is so. Before I saw you, heard you speak, or took your hand—for these three events that to you, it seems, look so trivial, are now epochs in my existence—I was a waif and stray in the world. It mattered not to me where I dwelt or whither I went. As it happened, I was going to Paris and thence to England, where I have that home and friends which you tell me I do not sufficiently appreciate. You are a little hard upon me there, for I like my home and love my friends dearly; yet, I will confess, that until yesterday I felt like a ship without sails or anchor, drifting here and there, as the wind might blow. Now all that is changed; I do not venture to hope that you will believe it; but I cannot think I have done wrong in telling you the simple truth.'

'I am sure you are speaking what you believe to be the truth, Mr. Gresham,' answered the young girl, gravely; 'but I am not sure that you have not done wrong in telling it me. On the other hand, I am quite certain that I should do wrong to listen to you any further. I thank you heartily for all your kindness to me; but your words have put an end to our acquaintance. I am going below, and shall remain there till we reach land. Good day, sir.'

And she rose from her seat, and held on to the nearest rope, which had long become a necessary precaution to all on deck who would keep their footing.

'Miss Hurt, you are surely not in earnest!' exclaimed the young man. 'The punishment you would thus inflict upon me for a venial fault is—oh! you cannot guess what it is: you are taking away my life blood.'

'If it really seems so, Mr. Gresham,' answered the girl, firmly, 'the discipline, harsh as it may appear, is only the more necessary to you. I am a friendless girl, and you are a gentleman of fortune. The gulf between us—since you compel me to speak of such a matter—is deeper than any between yonder crested waves. I depend upon your honour, and because I am sure you would not do a cowardly action, not to follow me.'

With steps so hasty, that they did not permit of his offering her any aid, and catching here and there for support, at ropes and blocks, she reached the cabin stairs in a few seconds, and disappeared.

To say truth, this proceeding had required of Elise Hurt not only courage but self-denial. In her own heart she did not think that there was either wrong or danger in what Mr. Gresham had said to her. She only felt that she ought to think so.

Her bringing-up had been of a prudent and somewhat narrow kind—yet not on that account less adapted to her circumstances, which were narrow also. Her aunt, to whose sole care she had been left from an early age, was a solid, sensible woman—of which Germany has, perhaps, a larger share than most nations—and she well understood that her niece could not afford, as girls more blessed with this world's goods might do, to receive any kindness from strange gentlemen that exceeded the limits of mere civil attention; and, in particular, she had warned her against listening to the first words of flattery, or compliment, unless they were so light as to be dispersed by a wholesome laugh. She had taken care also to instil in Elise's mind a proper understanding of her own position, out of which it was very unlikely that she should be raised by marriage, especially in England, where social distinctions were so strongly marked. This advice, winnowed by the machinery of her delicate nature from its more coarse and calculating fibres, Elise had laid to heart,

and was now profiting by. But, at the same time, it cost her not a little to exchange the breezy deck with the comforts that Gresham's hand had provided for her there, for the stifling saloon, where no such pleasant companionship awaited her. And his society had been very pleasant. Most young ladies appreciate the attentions of a well-bred, handsome young fellow, who, naturally indolent, evidently puts himself out of the way to give them pleasure; his youth and respectful ways are agreeable to them; his honied talk, if it is not insipid, is music to them. And if this is so in the general case, how much more grateful was such an acquaintance to a friendless, almost penniless girl, quite unaccustomed to be made much of, and who had never listened to a compliment, neatly turned, from the lips of any man. She blamed Mr. Gresham's folly for having put it out of her power to enjoy his society any longer; but she forgave him. It was very foolish of him to entertain such feelings as he had expressed to her, of course, but if he really did entertain them; if, as he said, he had merely spoken the simple truth to her out of the fulness of his heart, she must needs pity him. But she pitied herself also.

As for Mr. Gresham, left alone on the slanting deck in undisputed possession of his railway rug, he was furious with himself for having kept no better guard upon his tongue. Any one but himself, he argued, would have had more sense than to insinuate, far less declare, his passion for this simple, innocent girl, on so short an acquaintance. He might well congratulate himself that she had not taken his words as a positive insult; that she had set him down for the fool he was, instead of a scoundrel. It had been the height of self-conceit in him to take it for granted that the grateful acquiescence with which this poor, friendless girl had received his attentions, was a reciprocation of his own ardent feelings. What was there in a great hulking fellow like him, that almost at first sight a modest young woman should have been ready to listen to his protestations of love—for what he had said to her, he admitted, was nothing less. He had picked up her purse for her, it is true; but in returning it to her he had only shown that he was not a thief—certainly not acquired the right to talk to her as a lover. It was a sign he felt his mistake very seri-

ously, that he did not grumble to himself because he had foregone the delights of Paris and the pleasure of meeting Fred Mayne, his old college friend, there, as had been agreed upon, all for nothing—or for worse than nothing—as the being snubbed by this young woman might well be termed. Miss Elise Hurt was the exclusive object of his reflections and regret. He reproached himself for having gone so far as he had done with her, upon another account, also, which for the present need not be mentioned, especially as if he had succeeded in getting her to listen to him he would not have experienced much remorse. Moreover, though that was a small thing, in comparison with the main distress and disappointment, he had deprived himself, by his own folly, of a charming companion on the voyage. And such a voyage as it was like to be! The packet, half laden with cattle, was by no means the sort of craft which Mr. Gresham was wont to patronize. He always went by the best steamer and by the shortest route. He was never sea-sick; but he did not like to be inconvenienced. And now what had he let himself in for? A voyage at the best, of uncertain duration, in a clumsy vessel, labouring in a raging sea against a gale from the south-west; while at the worst—though to do him justice, he was not one to look on the black side of things—he might find himself united with the object of his affections—at the bottom of the Channel.

## CHAPTER VI.

## DRIVING SHOREWARD.

GRESHAM was no sailor, and he was by no means easily impressed with the sense of personal danger ; but, as the gale increased, he could not avoid the suspicion that the *Rhineland* was incompetent to fight against it, though whether this arose from her build, or the weakness of her engines, or the incompetence of her crew, he was no judge. He only knew for certain that she sank lower in the trough of the sea, remained longer than she had at first in those briny depths of the colour and opaqueness of bottle glass, and rose to the surface no longer buoyantly, but, as it were, with a dead lift. His view of matters was essentially that of a landsman, of course, yet it was clear that things were not as they should be. For example, notwithstanding his thick Ulster and the railway rug, he had now scarcely a dry thread on his body, for wave after wave washed the deck, so that it seemed at times to be under water. Seated at the foot of a mast in almost the centre of the vessel, he was in as level a spot as could be attained, yet his feet were as often as not higher than his head, and only by gripping a tautrope could he save himself at every lurch from being swept with the outgoing waters against the bulwarks.

There had been one or two male passengers who, like himself, had preferred the rough usage of the storm to the sights and sounds, and smells that were only too certain to be met with below stairs ; but even these had, sooner or later, sought the shelter of the cabin, save one individual, with bright grey eyes and keen, weatherbeaten face, who now ensconced himself close to Gresham. 'When there is war among the elements,' he observed, with a strong American accent, 'man and beast, fore-cabin and saloon passenger, all herd together in presence of the common danger.'

The idea of this individual from the second cabin thinking it

necessary to apologise for his intrusion on a privileged locality during what, not only to Mr. Gresham's eyes, but in actual fact, had become little less than a hurricane, tickled that gentleman's sense of humour.

'You have been in a good many gales like this, no doubt?' said he, good naturedly, and also, perhaps, with a secret hope that his companion might reply in the affirmative.

'I have been in a good many gales, yes, *sir*, but not in one like this,' answered the other, slowly. 'This is a most all-fired and catawampsious tornado.'

'Do you think the ship will live through it?' inquired Gresham, in as indifferent a tone as he could assume.

'I have not given my consideration, *sir*, to that contingency,' was the reply, delivered with a most philosophic air; 'I don't care two cents about the ship, which, moreover, is doubtless insured beyond her value; but if you ask my opinion as to whether you and I will live through this tornado—well, I give it you plump, I don't think we shall. If I was on dry land, and yet in possession of the facts concerning our position, I would lay ten dollars to one against any person on board this ship getting to land alive.'

'God bless my soul!' ejaculated Gresham, half mechanically, half from the serious shock of this communication.

'Yes, that's just what it's come to,' answered the other; the coolness, not to say the cynicism of whose tone was greatly intensified by a certain prominence in his left cheek which looked as though he were putting his tongue in it, but was really attributable to a plug of tobacco. 'A man—if he's to be called a man—knows how to take the last hard slap of Fate; the one with which she knocks you down for good and all. But the women, they mostly take to hysterics. There will be sad scenes down there, I reckon,' and he pointed to the cabin. 'It's time for them as has Prayer-books to sport 'em.'

'You are a seafaring man, of course, and I am a landsman,' answered Gresham, gravely; else I had hoped that my ignorance of the extent of our danger had magnified it. Why is it you take such a gloomy view of our position?'

'Well, the *Rhineland* is not A1, and few vessels even that are such could bear such a buffeting as this for many hours;

the engines don't work, in my opinion, as they should do ; we're lower in the water than we should be, and I guess there's water on board below stairs. Moreover—but look yonder and judge for yourself. Our captain would not heave that ballast overboard unless he were in great straits.'

Gresham's eye followed the direction of his companion's finger and perceived that one side of the cattle pen had been removed, and a corresponding portion of the ship's bulwarks swung back upon its hinge, so that with every roll of the ship to leeward many sheep and oxen fell into the sea. It was a simple way of unloading, which the position of the ship, now on one side, now on the other, alone could have rendered possible.

'There will be less meat for the English markets,' observed Gresham, resolved not to be outdone in coolness by the representative of Cousin Jonathan.

'There will be also less mouth to eat it,' was the quiet rejoinder.

'Is it not possible to put back?' inquired Gresham.

'No. To steer one point out of the wind's eye would be to write *Finis*.'

'If the gale doesn't abate, in short, we are dead men.'

'Nay, things are not quite so bad ; if we can presently hold our course to westward, we shall have the wind behind us. Then we shall run as if the devil were kicking us ; and if we are not pooped may find ourselves in Bristol instead of Heaven.'

Though the stranger spoke as if quite indifferent to the alternative, Gresham noticed that his eye watched narrowly every event—or mischance, for the words were now identical—that took place on board : the breaking loose of various articles that had been hitherto secured to the deck ; the occasional crashing of the bulwarks ; the lessening load of live stock ; the behaviour of the two men at the wheel, and the gestures of the captain, who, despite wind and wave, stuck like a limpet to his post upon the bridge between the paddle-boxes. He understood from what his companion said that if the ship were once in the Bristol Channel there would be a better chance for her, notwithstanding that she would be exposed to dangers of another nature.



Matters had thus endured for many hours, when the calls of hunger necessitated Gresham's descent into the saloon.

'If you are going to the larder,' said his Transatlantic friend, 'put both meat and drink in your pocket as I do'—and he produced a flask and a loaf—'for you may need it.'

'You mean if we have to take to the boats? But one of the sailors told me that nothing but a lifeboat could float in such a sea as this.'

'Never mind what the sailor told you. Do what I tell you. Depend upon it Providence always takes the most care of those who never throw away a chance.'

There seemed good sense, if not much faith, in this advice; and Gresham procured certain supplies from the ship's steward accordingly. That functionary was very pale and silent, and took the money without a trace of his usual promptness on such occasions. Although no sailor, he had been too many voyages in the *Rhineland* not to know that there was something greatly amiss with this one.

The passengers in the saloon, too, were silent; uttering only a moan or a groan as the shock of a wave threw them from their moorings on the sofas. Some of them had a frightened look in their eyes, like that of a hunted creature who knows not whither to fly; but most had a stern, grave air. One or two sat hand in hand with their wives, who were weeping silently, but there were very few women present. Gresham glanced into the ladies' cabin as he passed by its open door, and saw Elise Hurt sitting at the corner of the sofa that ran round the room. Her calm, quiet face presented a strange contrast to the sorrowful and despairing looks of her companions.

She rose, and, holding by the little pillars of the cabin, made her way towards him. 'Are matters really so bad, Mr. Gresham,' inquired she, quietly, 'as they are thought to be down here?'

'They are very bad,' he said. 'Would you prefer to come on deck?'

'If I shall not be in the way, I should,' answered she, simply.

The relations between them, it was understood by both, had altered with external circumstances, in the presence of such

sudden destruction as threatened them, all prudery disappeared; face to face with death it was moreover impossible that love should again become the topic of conversation.

'Put on every shawl and wrap that you possess,' he gravely said; and she obeyed him.

At the foot of the cabin stairs a lurch more violent than usual shook the vessel, and Elise would have fallen had not the young man clasped her in his arms.

As the vessel lurched a murmur of apprehension arose from the inmates of the saloon. 'What has happened, Mr. Gresham?' she exclaimed.

'I think the ship has changed her course: we are running before the wind.'

They got on deck, and reached their old place of shelter with less of difficulty than Gresham had met with in leaving it; for what he suspected had, in fact, happened. The vessel was now steaming—or rather scudding, for the paddles were of little use—with the gale behind her. The pitching and the rolling of the ship had somewhat mitigated, and her stern was now receiving the giant blows that had heretofore fallen on her bows. Neither cattle nor sheep now remained on board, and all things that had not been secured to the deck, or formed part of it, had been swept away. The Yankee had gone below, and besides the two men lashed to the wheel, the captain on the bridge, and the sailors at the pumps—which were kept constantly going—the two young people were the only persons who now braved the storm.

Not, however, that the condition of those in the saloon or cabin was much better; for every seam, through the straining of the ship, had begun to leak, and the berths were half full of water.

'Sit here, Elise,' said Gresham, without the least consciousness of having addressed her by her Christian name; 'and do not turn your head or look behind you.'

Being a woman—or perhaps it would be fairer to say, being human—Miss Hurt immediately looked behind her—to behold a sublime spectacle? The sea seemed to be pursuing the ship with open mouth, with the literal intention of swallowing her! Huge mountains of dark green water, fringed with flying foam,

were rushing at headlong speed after their trembling prey. It was a chase wherein the odds against the hunted thing were as a thousand to one; for strength and life were failing it. The *Rhineland* flew with amazing speed, but no longer of her own volition.

There was a certain light to be seen, and, by which it was attempted to steer obliquely, but the ship scarcely answered her helm at all; though this, as it happened was of small importance, for the light was a floating one—the *Hope* lightship, which the gale had driven from her moorings two miles nearer shore. A little canvas, with extreme peril, had been spread in the forepart of the ship, when she changed her course, to keep her head straight, but this had instantly been split to ribbons. It was plain to the most inexperienced eye that the labouring and groaning vessel was almost *in extremis*.

Suddenly a tremendous sea broke over the bow, sweeping everything, including even the boats, to the after-part of the deck, lifting the very starboard anchor on to the fore-castle, and washing one of the steersmen from the wheel.

That Elise Hurt and Gresham did not share his fate was solely owing to the protection of the mast and which they were screened. For the moment it seemed that all was over. The steamer, indeed, could no longer be so entitled, for its engines had stopped, the inundation having put the fires out; nor henceforth could the *Rhineland* be termed a vessel—it was a mere log, at the mercy of the winds and waves. Still it floated. Gresham's arm encircled Elise, and drew her closer to him; 'Be of good courage,' he said, 'I see the land.'

For the first time, indeed, the land had become dimly visible by the occasional light afforded by the moon when uneclipsed by the clouds that raced across her. A long black line of coast—high and rocky—showed itself on the northern horizon. There were more people now on deck—the watch below among them—who had been driven from their quarters by the inroad of the waves. Despair and irresolution reigned among them, but not in every case.

'Load the gun,' roared the captain.

All the boats were badly damaged, some having been broken to pieces, and in any case no boat could have been lowered in

such a sea. The only chance of rescue was from the land ; and it was high time to tell, if haply there should be ears to listen to them, in what miserable straits they stood. The powder, in such confusion, was not easily procured, and the operation of loading was still more difficult. But, somehow or other, it was effected. Then the roar of minute gun after minute gun mixed with the artillery of the gale. Every thud of the cannon sounded like a knell to these poor wretches ; till suddenly the hearts of all were lighted up by the sight of a thin light to southward. The consciousness of their peril had been at last conveyed to their fellow creatures on shore, and had been thus acknowledged ! The light was that of the beacon that the men of the coastguard had lit upon the quay at Halcombe Point.

## CHAPTER VII.

## ON THE REEF.

AS to the locality in which the *Rhineland* was now situated, the Captain himself had only an approximate idea of it, while the majority of the passengers only knew that they were in the Bristol Channel.

The American, whose name was Pearce, and who preferred, as it afterward appeared, to be called 'Commodore,' being appealed to (by reason of his knowing looks) upon this subject, grimly replied that he did not know in what portion of the Channel they were, but that in his opinion the question would soon be solved; the expression he used was, 'I guess it won't be long before we're at the bottom of it.' To do him justice, he only gave this answer to the men; to the women he always expressed himself hopefully. He said that there was a mighty difference between being drowned and having the starch taken out of their collars—which had happened to the poor creatures already. It was known, of course, by this time to himself and every seaman on board, that the ship was driving on shore, and that the question of safety for every soul on board depended on what sort of shore it was.

While he was making this very observation in Gresham's ear the ship suddenly struck with tremendous violence, though against no visible object, and like a dreadful echo a shriek of horror burst from every part of the ship. Many of those still below were killed at once by their heads being dashed against the sides, and even the roof of the cabin, many on deck were flung into the sea. It was the very crisis of horror and despair.

'To the fore-top for your lives,' exclaimed Pearce to the two young people.

'Go, Mr. Gresham, go,' cried Elise, 'you have already done your best for me. I cannot climb the shrouds.'

'It is probable you never tried,' observed the American, drily.

Gresham's only reply was to lift her in his arms, and aided by Pearce and her own exertions, they managed to make their way through the terrified crowd to the forecabin; the crew had already fled there, and were running up the rigging in swarms. The top was occupied at once by as many as it would hold. With the help of the two men, however, Elise climbed to the very foot of it, and out of the reach of the waves that now swept the ship from stem to stern.

'There is a woman here,' said Gresham to those above; 'is there not a man among you who will give up his place?'

There was no answer except from the American from below. 'No they won't, I bet. They will never oblige a lady even by so much as a seat in a car. You are better where you are, Miss,' he added, in a lower tone, 'if your young man will only lash you to the rigging.'

For this purpose Gresham had nothing but a handkerchief, supplemented by the strength of his own arms.

'I can hold you on till daylight, Elise,' he whispered, 'and longer; while I have life I will keep life in you.'

'Next to God, I trust in you,' answered she, simply. It was fortunate that she had more than one friend, for though every inch above them was occupied by clinging limbs, the wretched people below endeavoured to make their way up, and even to climb over their very bodies. The horrors of their situation, rocked by every blow of the sea, and drenched with its spray, was aggravated by the pitiful cries which burst from those around them. From the broken skylight above the cabin miserable groans still issued, and now and then a sharp shriek of agony: 'My child, my little one, is drowned!' was one of them, which went to Elise's heart. For the most part they were cries wrung by necessity from human throats, but now and then there was an ejaculation of frenzied terror. For instance, a young fellow immediately below the American suddenly exclaimed that the ship was breaking to pieces.

'Let it break,' answered the Yankee, contemptuously, 'you'll keep whole enough, I'll warrant.'

It was curious to observe what an effect this one man's coolness and quaint good sense had upon those around him, notwithstanding the peril and misery of their position. That they were

on a rock, and a hidden one, was all of which the best-informed were conscious. The force of the wave that had just thrown them upon it had been such as to carry the whole vessel on to the reef; otherwise, had part only been driven on to it, and part left on a lower level exposed to the breach of the sea, the ship would have been torn asunder in a few minutes. Thanks to the lowness of the tide, the masts and rigging stood out of water, and were only washed to any height by some exceptionally huge wave, but in the mean time it was only too plain that the ship's timbers were giving way under the reiterated blows of the sea. The wind was as keen as it was furious, and the cold soon began to tell upon these poor creatures, many of whom had rushed from below but scantily clad. Only a few women besides Elise Hurt had obtained a footing on the shrouds at all, and one by one, overcome by fatigue and fear, these relaxed their hold of the ropes, and were whirled away into the raging deep, as often as not in silence. The two men bade Elise shut her eyes, under pretence of her thus obtaining a little rest, but in reality to prevent her witnessing these distressing scenes. More than once, however, a man came tumbling down from the foretop or the shrouds more immediately above them, and that so close as to imperil her own safety in his descent into his watery tomb. The cold had benumbed the hands of these poor fellows, and they had become too weak from exhaustion and hunger to retain their position.

And here it was that the forethought of the American stood Gresham and his companion in good stead. Not only did the young fellow insist upon her partaking of the viands with which he had filled his pockets, but also administered, under Mr. Pearce's directions, an amount of brandy which, in other circumstances, would have had a most unpleasant effect upon any young lady's organization.

"The blood is the life," says the Scripture,' were Mr. Pearce's words; 'and the brandy is the blood upon this occasion—you needn't be afraid of taking too much, ma'am.'

Elise, though very unwillingly, being as temperate as all German maidens are, took what was given her: which, after all, was not so very much, for what with the swaying of the mast, and the numbness of Gresham's hands, much of the liquor missed the



mouth it was aimed at. Nor was it only the young man's hands that were numb, for his feet had become like marble; and, in compliance with his request, Elise, more than once, had to stamp upon them to restore their circulation. That she herself was exempt from this inconvenience of course proved the care that the other took of her, in which it must be acknowledged that he was greatly assisted by Mr. Pearce.

It was strange to see how during those weary hours these three were drawn together—almost as much mentally as physically—by the circumstances of that supreme occasion. Each spoke to the other of himself and of his private affairs with a frankness and confidence that they could not have used after six weeks of ordinary intercourse.

'If you get to land, Mr. Gresham,' said Elise, 'send a few words of tender farewell for me to my good aunt;' and she gave him her address with methodical exactness.

'If I live, Elise, *you* will live,' returned the young fellow, simply. 'It would be no self-sacrifice to perish in trying to save you, since life without you would not be worth having.'

He spoke with earnestness as well as fervour, and was quite unconscious of any extravagance of expression. In such sublime moments the emotions become, as it were, condensed: his whole previous existence appeared divided into two parts; during one part he had known Elise Hurt; during the other he had not known her. And the former part monopolized his thoughts.

'Do not talk so,' answered the girl, reprovingly; 'for in my case there is but one person to mourn me; and my good aunt, I am thankful to think, has others to love her. But you—you yourself told me that you have dear friends and relatives —'

'One relative—a very kind one,' interrupted the young fellow; 'and some dear friends certainly.'

He hesitated a moment; should he tell her something he had in his mind, or should he not? The waves were beating against the doomed vessel more frantically, it seemed, than ever. The tide was rising. No, it was not worth while. 'You, Elise, are more than all to me,' he added, simply.

Presently Gresham, turning to the American, begged him

to send the girl's message to her aunt, in case he should be the sole survivor of the three.

'Oh, yes,' he answered; 'and do you remember, for my sake, the address of Henry Pearce, at the "Figure Head" Hotel, Charing Cross.'

Gresham smiled sadly; for small as either of their chances of life were, *his* chance—bound up as it was with that of the girl—was surely the smaller.

'That is your brother, I suppose?' he answered.

'No, *sir*; it is myself,' replied the other, coolly. 'The "Figure Head" is always my address in London town, in case you should want a skipper for a yacht. My friends call me Commodore. I've got my certificates ——'

Here a great wave filled his mouth with salt water, and blinded all three of them with its spray. Two more wretched creatures were thrown from their hold by the shock of it, and were carried away in its whirl. These had occupied positions above 'the tops,' and were worn out with hunger as much as fatigue; those, on the other hand, in Gresham's vicinity, had been supplied, at Elise's entreaty, with the remainder of his provisions.

'It is no use keeping them for me, love,' she had whispered; 'for death will come to me before hunger returns.'

Her logic was unanswerable; it was plain that the vessel could now only hold together for a very short time.

Presently 'the dawn, the dawn!' she moaned in German.

'What is it?' inquired the American, anxiously. 'Her strength is failing. Give her more brandy.'

Before Gresham could explain, some one cried out, 'The land, the land!' And in a moment the coast line became distinct against the sky.

'Great Heaven! it is Halcombe Point!' exclaimed Gresham.

'It is something to know your bearings,' observed the American. 'What sort of landing do you give to strangers hereabouts?'

'It is a rock-bound shore,' answered Gresham, gravely. 'The ship must be on the Lancet Reef,' he murmured. 'There are people on the pier. Sir Robert ——'

"Sir Robert," and "Halcombe," ejaculated Elise. 'Is it Sir Robert Arden of Halcombe Hall of whom you speak?'

'Yes, dearest ; do you know anything of him ?'

'It was to his house I was going as governess.'

'And I am his nephew,' said Gresham. The coincidence, strange as it was, did not strike him so forcibly as might be expected ; those words of his companion, 'I was going,' speaking of herself in the past tense, had saddened him too much to admit of wonder.

'Hold on all,' cried the American, in a sharp, clear voice. 'I see a boat coming—a life-boat.'

It was well that he had given his warning before he gave his news ; for the excitement which his good tidings communicated to the poor wretches about him passed the bounds of reason. Even as it was, it was with difficulty that some could be persuaded not to cast themselves into the sea to meet the coming succour.

What an apt term is that of Life-boat ! How nobly does the godchild prove its right to the name that has been given to it ! What an ark of safety does it appear to those for whom the depths of ocean rage and roar—thanks to it—in vain ! In no other visible form do Human Endeavour and Divine Intention combine so sublimely. Consider, too, the comparative humility—nay, to all appearance, the inadequacy—of the means of salvation. The 'Commodore's' keen eyes and technical knowledge had at once caused him to recognize the nature of the help that was approaching them, but to the ordinary observer it looked scarcely help at all, but merely more of wreck and ruin. Was it possible that that frail undecked boat, now tossed on the foam of some mighty wave, now lost in the trough of the sea, not urged by its rowers at all, but flying before the fury of the gale, could be Rescue—Life ? To those on shore it seemed so at all events ; for though the sound of their cheering could not reach the ears for which they were intended, the poor shipwrecked creatures could see flags waving from the little pier and from the windows of the mill in token of joyful sympathy. Notwithstanding their evil plight, this moral support—the sympathy of their fellow-creatures—had an inspiring effect ; they felt, as it were, that the great heart of humanity was beating high for them. They were not cut off, these things seemed to assure them, from the sunshine, yet.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RECOGNITION.

JOHN DYNELEY had not spared Sir Robert's bay mare upon his way to Archester ; it was not his way to push a willing horse to the full extent of its powers, but human life was in the balance that night, and he had not spared the spur. He was a heavy man for so speedy a journey, but his weight had this advantage, that it steadied the gallant bay, against whom such a wind was blowing, broadside on, as had never swept Halcombe Moor within the memory of man. The curate, however, paid little heed to the gale ; he was recalling to his inward gaze the bright look of approval that had lit up Evy Nicoll's face when he had asked her stepfather for the use of his mare ; that would have been reward enough, if he had needed any, for the discomforts of his ride, of which in truth he recked but little. He was a man to whom wind and rain, and heat and cold, were indifferent, a man of thews and sinews, as well as of girth and inches, and with a great heart in his great body. His intelligence was not remarkable, but he had plenty of common sense, which, however inconvenient to a theologian, is to a working clergyman the most valuable of all senses. And yet at this moment he was doing a very foolish thing, for what could be more contrary to common sense than to cherish so tenderly that last look of Evelyn Nicoll, whom he knew to be as good as engaged to another man ?

Common report had given her to Sir Robert's nephew, George Gresham, and while she had taken no pains to contradict it, her mother had, by implication, corroborated it. Indeed, it was understood that George was shortly expected at the Hall, for the very purpose of making himself better known to his future bride before the knot should be tied between them.

Still, as Evelyn had never with her own lips confirmed the general opinion, the curate gave himself the benefit (as he fondly

imagined it to be) of the doubt, and persuaded himself that he was doing no harm in thus secretly worshipping his idol.

He was far too modest a man to suppose that his passion was returned; he was not half rich enough for her, he knew, nor half good enough for her, he thought—though in that last idea in my judgment he was mistaken—and she was altogether, he confessed, out of his reach. If he did entertain a hope that he should ever win her, it was one of the very vaguest kind; but now and then he could not avoid giving himself up to it. In his saner moments he foresaw that he must be content with honouring and admiring her as the wife of another, and would think himself happy if, under such circumstances, the opportunity might be afforded him of doing her some self-sacrificing service.

Such men there are in this nineteenth century, by contrast with whose natures all that has been recorded of the so-called 'Ages of Chivalry' grows pale and dim. One other mistress he had who was not denied to him, Work, and his devotion to her was incessant. Some fools thought less of his labour in the Lord's Vineyard because he went about it as often as not with a short pipe in his mouth; he was labouring in it now (or words have lost their meaning), and though his pipe, by reason of the gale, was an impossibility, his attire was far from what is generally associated with the ecclesiastical calling. He wore a dark pea-jacket, with waistcoat and trousers of the same thick material; and his black cravat was knotted instead of being tied in the orthodox way.

Thus he rode at the bay's best speed along the sandy roads, making occasional short cuts (not free from rabbit holes) across the heathery moor, till the lights of Archester gleamed before him.

Without drawing rein for an instant he galloped down the stony street to the little pier, which he knew on such a night would have its complement of seafaring men, watching their old enemy the storm, and in a few words explained his errand.

'A ship on the Lancet, opposite Halcombe Point, and the lifeboat wanted; ten pounds a head from Sir Robert to each man that pulls an oar in her.'

It would doubtless have 'looked better in print' had he appealed only to these brave men's sense of duty, and it would

have been sufficient, for the mariners of Archester were never backward in risking limb and life for their fellow-creatures ; but on the principle of 'surplusage being no error,' the curate addressed them as we have described. Moreover, it saved time, and time—a few minutes more or less—was of immense importance to all those upon that cruel reef (which, however, had thus far been the cause of their preservation). Time had become, indeed, the alternative of Eternity with them.

A rush was at once made for the boat shed where the cork-jackets and all other things were kept ; and in an incredibly short space of time eight men were ready for this perilous enterprise. There are two things which expedite human action above all other motive powers ; namely, the opposing elements of Fire and Water. The celerity with which a fire engine is got ready and started is the greatest triumph of human forethought and agility. Next to that is the quickness with which a life-boat is got under weigh. From the shed at Archester were two 'slips,' one on either side, so that the boat could be launched to north or south, according to the quarter from which the wind was blowing ; the men were in their places, and a score of eager pairs of hands were on her stern and sides ready to run the *Swiftsure* (contraction of Swift and Sure, I wonder ?) off the track on which she stood, when the coxswain suddenly roared, 'Stop !'

There was a man missing ; only seven being in the boat beside the coxswain. From the list of the crew hard by (for everything was at hand in that place) he began to read out the names of those absent ; 'George Parfitt ?' 'Here,' answered a ready voice. 'You are not George.'

'No ; he is ill a-bed, but I am his brother.'

'A bold fellow, no doubt ; but hardly strong enough for the tight job before us.' 'Henry Absolon.'

'Gone to Mirton,' was the reply.

'Hullo, sir, it's quite irregular.' This to Dyneley, who had slipped on a cork-jacket and sou'wester cap, and jumped into the boat

'No matter, coxswain, I am as strong as any of you, and can pull as good an oar. There is not a moment to lose, I tell you—push off.'

There was a burst of cheering, which, however, in no way impeded the exertions of those who thus indulged their feelings, for at the same moment the boat began rapidly to move down the slope.

'Steady, steady.' The moment she touched the sea it seemed to every man that he was under water. Never since the gallant *Swiftsure* had been built had she put out in the teeth of such a storm, the wind beat almost dead against the land, and strove with frantic screams and fiendish fury (the Prince of the Powers of the air being in command that night in person) to dash the boat back on the rocky shore. 'She never, never,' shrieked the frantic blast, 'shall ride the main this night to rob the hungry waves of their human prey.'

Thrice the *Swiftsure* was cast a score of yards up the strand, then withdrawn like a plaything which a child throws from it only to pursue and clutch again, but the fourth time the oar-blades and the strong arms that use them are plied to such good purpose that she is flung back no more.

'Steady, men, steady,' cries the coxswain, for rowing against a moving mountain range renders time more difficult to keep than between Barnes and Putney; 'once round the Point the wind will do our work for us.'

This was satisfactory so far as it went, but made it clear to every man (if he had not known it before) that the return to Archester *against* the wind would be a physical impossibility. After performing their perilous mission, should that be practicable, they would have to go on to Mirton Harbour (twenty miles away) if they should reach harbour at all, since to try Halcombe Point would be to go to pieces.

Such things are trifles to the heroes who man our lifeboats, and we ashore think still less of them, but supposing even the case of a country doctor robbed of his night's rest by a summons to a sick bed, and compelled to ride twenty miles in a storm which did not admit of his return, we should call it a hard one; add to this utmost fatigue of body and extreme peril of life, and give the laurel where it is due.

Once round the Point the *Swiftsure* flew before the wind, as though, instead of being a bare boat, she were a racing cutter. She was following, in fact, the very route of the *Rhineland*,



only the sea had a very different customer to deal with. The waves filled her again and again, but her escape pipes freed her from the deluge as quickly as it was poured in; they threw her on her side, but she made light of that, and even had they thrown her over she would have righted again in half a second—though, unhappily, empty.

Thus hurried along at headlong speed it was no wonder that, in a shorter time than it had taken the mare and her rider to cross the Moor, the one man in the boat to whom the use of his eyes was not denied—for the eight rowers, we may be sure, cast no look behind them—exclaimed, 'There she is, boys.'

And there she was; half of her—the stern part—now covered by the rising waves, and the other half, now hid, now seen, with a bare mast sticking out of it, covered with human beings, like bees in swarm. The sea was running like a mill race, and the sharp reef beneath it.

'I doubt if we can get nigh her,' ejaculated the coxswain.

'There are women on board,' observed Number Six, who was the curate.

'Never fear, Master Dyneley, but we'll do what man can do to save 'em,' was the reply, not without a certain haughtiness in its tone. The waves and winds could be discounted, as it were, as a source of peril, but whether there was water enough above the rock to float the lifeboat to leeward of the wreck, was an experiment not to be reckoned upon, but only tried. If they shot by her, it was plain they could not put back again in the teeth of such a gale, ere the flowing tide should engulf the last spar of the *Rhineland*.

'Steady; be ready to ship oars and out with the grappling irons.' The next minute they were under her quarter, and had made fast to it.

'The women first,' cried the coxswain, in a voice of thunder. There were but three women left, and none of these could move across the rocking deck without men to help them. The first two were carried, rather than led, and lifted into the *Swiftsure*; the third, Elise, used her own limbs, though stiff and cramped, upheld on either side by the American and Gresham.

All sat where they were placed, without a word, as though astounded (as they well might be) at their own deliverance.

The wreck was clear of all save one man, who clung to the mast apparently stupefied.

'Quick, quick,' exclaimed half-a-dozen voices. He never moved.

'Are we all to be drowned for one fool?' ejaculated the coxswain, passionately. 'Cast off, boys.'

'One moment, sirree,' cried the clear shrill voice of the American. He leapt back on the wreck, seized the still hesitating man round the waist, and fairly threw him among the rest.

'It's the poor Capen, Coxen; he don't like to leave his ship,' said he apologetically. 'I've felt the same myself—especially when I've had a share in her.'

As the boat once more flew before the wind its occupants could see a little group upon the quay of Halcombe, whose joy appeared only second to their own. These persons, of course, knew not how many of the crew had succumbed to the waves, or to the fatigues and privations of the night; they only saw that every soul upon the wreck had been taken off; and were in comparative safety. They were well aware that on their cruel shore no boat could land in such a sea, but to many of the poor shivering creatures on board the *Swiftsure* it seemed strange enough that they should be turning their backs on these hospitable and friendly people.

Gresham, of course, knew why they didn't land at 'The Point,' and secretly he was not displeased that the attempt could not be made. He recognized female forms upon the quay, and guessed, rightly enough, their identity; and he had good—or at least sufficient—reason to congratulate himself that the *Swiftsure* was making for Mirton. He was now turning over in his mind whether it would not be better to wait a day or two before presenting himself to his friends at home, and to let it be imagined that he had not taken passage in the ill-fated *Rhineland* at all.

The accommodation on board lifeboats is in extent considerable, but it is not of a select or private character. Rescued folks settle down where they can, and are seldom found to complain of their quarters. The craft is broad of beam, and there is room for passengers, even in the very centre of it, without interfering with the rowers. Here sat Elise Hurt, exhausted

but grateful, with the same loving arms supporting her that had made her hold secure upon the shrouds.

'I owe my life to you,' were the first words she murmured in his ear.

'Nay, darling, the Commodore, as he calls himself' (he had once commanded, as it turned out, a certain flotilla of trading vessels to the West Indies) 'did his part; it was he, for example, who called my attention to the victualling department—I have still a little brandy left, by-the-bye.'

'Not for me,' she said, putting aside the flask; 'I feel I shall live now. Is it not strange, George, that wet and cold as I am, in this open boat, and with only a plank between us and death, I am happier than I have ever been?'

'It is not strange,' answered the young man tenderly. 'It is because you love.'

'Ah, yes,' she sighed.

'Why do you sigh, darling?'

'Because this may be the last hour in which I may say, "I love." Out yonder—with the waves yawning for us, I told you the secrets of my heart; there seemed no harm in it, and it was very sweet to tell them. But now we are no longer two fellow-creatures awaiting the same doom; I am again a penniless girl, and you—you are Sir Robert Arden's nephew.'

'Well, and what then,' said Gresham, lightly, but there was a look of trouble in his face that accorded ill with his jesting tone.

'I know not what then,' she answered. 'You know best how it will fare with us. But I have always heard that the rich English are very proud. There will be a great gulf fixed between you, Sir Robert's nephew, and me, the governess of his children.'

'They are not his children,' replied Gresham; 'they are the children of his wife by her first marriage.'

'Indeed? Then you are his own kith and kin, and they are not. His very heir, perhaps.'

'Perhaps; though I have never thought of that. When one has a benefactor so kind as he has been, one does not speculate upon his death.'

'I hope not, dear. Pray do not be annoyed with me—'

for 'there had been a certain irritation in his tone; 'I only wish to look matters in the face. As it seems to me you are bound, above all things, to obey this good uncle's wishes; and especially never to act counter to them. Is it likely, think you, that he will wish you to marry *me*?'

'My dear Elise, I thought that those who love were given to building dream-castles for love to live in; whereas you build only obstacles to love. It will be time enough to combat opposition when it has arisen. There will, of course, be objections to our union, some even that have not entered into your apprehensions; but we must trust to time and happy chance. My uncle is very peculiar: a man of impulse and sentiment; by no means the hard, conventional man of the world you have probably pictured to yourself. But, no doubt, we must be prudent. It will not be necessary to tell the good folks at Halcombe all that we have said to one another. Nor even need you repeat the conviction you expressed just now that I was the happy means of saving your life last night; it is an exaggeration to start with, and to proclaim such a fact would be very invidious. People would think that gratitude might cause you to overrate my deserts—do you understand, darling?'

'I do not like concealments,' answered Elise, gravely. 'Besides, to dwell under the same roof with you, and never to be able to speak to you, nor look towards you, as I should wish to speak and look—No, Mr. Gresham, I could not do it.'

'What? You call me Mr. Gresham because you have no longer need of my loving service? That is ungenerous, Elise.'

'You do not think so—you *can*-not think so,' answered the girl impetuously; 'it gives me ten times the pain to address a cold word to you than it gives you to hear it. But it is better to say "Farewell" now—cruel as it seems to part—than later on.'

'We will never part, Elise; I swear it.'

'Hush, hush!' for in his vehemence he had raised his voice, so that if those next to him had not been sunk in their own thoughts they might have heard him, despite the roar of the wind and the rush of the wave. 'God has been very good to us; do not call Him to witness to aught that does not lie in the path of duty. I fear—I fear that your love for me runs counter to it.'

'Do not fear, Elise,' he answered gravely; 'Love and Duty can never be in opposition to one another. Only, as I have said, we must expect obstacles. The course of *true* love never does run smooth, you know.'

Elise was silenced, if not convinced; it was difficult, no doubt, to compel herself to picture mischances, not only to her own happiness, but to that of her preserver.

Presently they came in sight of Mirton, a picturesque village, built in zig-zag up steep cliffs; but with a good harbour and breakwater. Once within shelter of the latter the mountain waves lost their crests, the gale thundered harmless above their heads. With a few more strokes of the oar they reached the side of the little jetty where a few men were gathered together in the grey dawn.

Gresham and the Commodore assisted Elise to land, and were escorting her up the winding street to the little inn, when they were overtaken by one of the crew, who seemed about to address them.

'I will see you in five minutes, my good fellow,' said Gresham. 'For the brave work you and your mates have performed to night, no reward can be sufficient, but—— What? Dyneley?'

'Yes, it is I,' answered the curate, removing his sou'-wester. 'I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw you step into the boat; and when I felt sure of your identity I had no breath for even a word of recognition.'

Then Gresham remembered that the features of this man had seemed somewhat familiar to him; he had had other things to think about, or else there had been plenty of opportunities of observing him, for he had sat cheek-by-jowl with 'Number Six' for the last two hours.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. WALCOT VENTURES A SUGGESTION.

SO unexpected was the presence of the Rev. John Dyneley that for the moment Gresham forgot the strangeness of his guise, and even the obligation which he owed to him in common with the rest of the gallant crew of the *Swiftsure*; the thought that was monopolising his mind was, 'Does he guess the relation between Elise and myself?'

He had said he could scarce believe his eyes when he saw Gresham, and, knowing what he knew as respected Evelyn, it would have been even more difficult, if he had overheard his talk in the life-boat, to believe his ears.

There had been something in the curate's tone which had struck him he addressed as smacking of reproof as well as astonishment, but that might have been but the sting of conscience. Whether he knew all, or not, however, any lingering idea Gresham might have entertained of ignoring under his uncle's roof all previous acquaintance with Elise, even if he could have persuaded her to join in such deception, was now become out of the question. There was nothing left for him but to assume a bold front.

'This is Miss Elise Hurt, Dyneley; the young lady Lady Arden was expecting from Germany, and who, I am thankful to say, will reach her journey's end after all; thanks to you and the rest.—Miss Hurt, I demand an amount of confidence in me that almost reaches to credulity, when I ask you to believe that this gentleman in a dustman's hat and a cork jacket is a British divine.'

Elise held out her little hand with a quick flush. 'How brave you are, sir! how good you have been to us,' said she simply. 'I shall think more highly than ever of God's ministers since you are one of them.'

'I am glad to have been of use,' said the Curate, blushing

too; for he could not bear anybody's praise. 'But as for my own share in last night's work, I had no choice in the matter; for the crew could not be made up without me.'

'Ah,' exclaimed the Commodore; 'that's what looks well in a man. One always likes a fellow who sits down at euchre merely to oblige. I've noticed they're generally good players, those. And *you* pull a good oar, sir—there was no better in the boat, except the stroke's. Let me shake your hand, sir.'

The Curate, of course, shook hands; but it was evident the Yankee puzzled him.

'This is Commodore Pearce of the United States,' explained Gresham; 'without whose sagacity and assistance neither the young lady nor myself would, I honestly believe, be alive at this moment. I hope I shall persuade him to pass a few days at Halcombe, where I am sure that he will find a hearty welcome.'

'Thank *you*, Mr. Gresham, but my time is limited. So soon as I have got my clothes dry, and have had a snatch of sleep at this *hotel*, I'm off for London.'

This was a relief to Gresham, though he was ashamed of himself at finding it to be so. However successful he might be in imposing silence concerning recent events upon Elise, it would have been quite impossible, he felt, to keep Mr. Pearce's mouth shut, who, unaware of the shortness of the two young people's acquaintance with one another, had taken it for granted, from the first, that they were an engaged couple.

'You will allow me, at all events, Mr. Pearce, to be your banker,' said Gresham. 'I am well known here.'

'Thank you, sir,' interrupted the Commodore; 'but I have given nothing to the fishes, except my kit—and that won't clothe the Leviathan. My money is safe in my breast pocket; and I've got tobacco for a week's consumption, though it's a trifle damp.'

They had now reached the 'Golden Lion,' the hostess of which had been already informed of the arrival of her involuntary guests, and had partly attired herself to welcome them. It was arranged that Miss Hurt should be left in her charge till a carriage could be sent for her from the Hall; and after some refreshment for the inner man, and dry clothes for the outer,



lent him by the landlord, Gresham took his leave of the Commodore with many expressions of goodwill on either side.

'If I'm in England, siree, mind I come down to your wedding,' were the Commodore's last words, which, delivered as they were in Dyneley's presence, turned Gresham scarlet. Then the two young men stepped into a dog-cart,—for the gale was still strong enough to have turned any closed vehicle that the 'Golden Lion' could offer them topsy-turvey,—and set out for Halcombe.

It was a satisfaction to Gresham that the presence of the hostler close behind them precluded any conversation of a private nature; but as a matter of fact the Curate was the last man to have asked his companion for any explanations. He had certainly observed the familiarity that existed between Gresham and Elise; and had even caught some fragments of their conversation in the lifeboat. But his nature was too unsuspicious to jump to the right conclusion from such scanty premises. The Commodore's parting words had rather dissipated, than confirmed, any suspicions he might have entertained; for he took it for granted that they alluded to Gresham's marriage with Evelyn. Had he guessed the truth, it might be imagined that he would have gladly welcomed such evidence of his rival's lack of love for Evelyn; but so loyal was his nature, that he would on the contrary have found it a cause of quarrel with Gresham for his traitorous conduct. Even as it was, Gresham's behaviour had excited his displeasure, though his sense of justice compelled him to make allowances for his young friend, placed as he had been in such an exceptional position with respect to his fair companion. Perhaps there was nothing that made John Dyneley so ill-understood as this gift of charity, as rare with the common-place Pious, wrapped up in the salvation of their own souls, as with the children of this world. Moreover, John Dyneley was a gentleman, and he did not feel justified in hauling a fellow-creature over the coals without adequate warrant.

From all which it arose that there was little conversation between the two occupants of the front seat of the dog-cart; and what there was confined itself to details of the wreck and the rescue.

Unwilling to disturb the tenants of the Hall from their slumbers after their long night of watching, the Curate invited Gresham to breakfast with him at his lodgings at the Manor Farm. Here they aroused the young farmer, Gilbert Holm himself, from his first sleep, for he had remained with some of the men at the Point till they had not only seen the lifeboat carry off the tenants of the *Rhineland*, but beheld the remains of that unfortunate vessel go to pieces, which happened in about an hour after the rescue. He described the distress and agitation of the young ladies as having been very great, but they had restrained their tears, he said, until the safety of all on board had been assured, and when, as it seemed to him 'there was no sort of occasion for 'em.'

'Ah, Gilbert, you don't know the nature of women,' said Gresham, jestingly.

'Perhaps not, sir,' answered the farmer drily; 'but I know the nature of one of them as I'm talking about enough to be sartin' sure that she would amost ha' cried her pretty eyes out, had she been aware as a certain person was on board that craft last night; and I dare say Mr. Dyneley here could give a name to her.'

'Well, of course, they would all have been greatly more distressed,' said the Curate, evasively, 'had they been aware that Mr. George was among the wrecked.'

It was only common civility in Dyneley to ask his nominal host (for Holm was only Sir Robert's tenant) to breakfast with them considering that he had been disturbed by his visitors at so untimely an hour, so the three men partook of their meal together.

There was little talk, however, among them, for the young farmer's allusion to the supposed engagement between Evelyn and Gresham had annoyed the latter. He thought it familiar and impertinent, though perhaps he would not have done so had he not been thrown, during the last three days, into the companionship of Miss Elise Hurt.

'There's to be a new arrival at the Hall to-day, sir, as I understand,' observed Holm, addressing the Curate. Gresham felt growing red and white by turns; he felt sure that this insolent clodhopper—with whom, however, he had heretofore

been on the familiar terms that are usual between men in their relative positions in a place like Halcombe—was about to speak of Elise herself.

‘Indeed?’ said the Curate. ‘Who may that be?’

‘Well, the young ladies are going to have a new maid. John is going to take the gig over to Archester this afternoon to meet her.’

Gresham uttered a little sigh of relief; it was plain that this man had not heard of the expected arrival of the governess.

‘I hope John will have less wind against him than I had last night,’ said the Curate, ‘or he will need some ballast on his voyage out.’

‘Ah, to be sure, you must ha’ been much blowed about,’ observed the farmer. ‘Perhaps a little drop of the right stuff would do you no harm this morning.’ And he produced from his cupboard—the fire had been lit for them in the kitchen, as being at that early hour most convenient—a bottle of brandy.

‘No, thank you,’ said Dyneley; ‘I never touch such a thing in the morning.’

‘Nor I,’ said Gresham, curtly.

‘Well then, gentlemen, I’ll just drink to the health of both of you.’ And he helped himself to a full glass.

Though still very early, it was agreed that Gresham should now go to the Hall to relieve the fears of its tenants as to Miss Hurt’s safety, and the Curate accompanied him as far as the garden gate.

‘There was one person, Dyneley, I did not ask you about when we were in the dog-cart together, because of the ears so close behind us. Ferdinand Walcot is here, of course, and as much master as ever!’

‘Yes; even more so, I think, than when you left us.’

‘I call it a downright infatuation in my uncle,’ exclaimed the other, with irritation.

‘Well, I confess I don’t share Sir Robert’s predilection for his brother-in-law,’ answered the Curate, smiling; ‘but I suppose we are what your uncle calls antipathetic—in plain English, I don’t like Mr. Walcot, and he don’t like me.’

‘Of course not. I had hoped that you might have opened my uncle’s eyes; you are the only man who could do so without the suspicion of having any interest in the matter.’

'Nay, I have nothing to say against the man. It is only a question with me of "I do not like thee, Doctor Fell!" and I cannot suppose that Sir Robert would espouse my prejudices. When I did once venture to say that I thought Walcot took too much upon himself in the way of parish affairs, your uncle was obviously annoyed. He said that I little knew Ferdinand Walcot; everybody who did so must revere him. "As for myself," he added, "there is a sacred tie between us which nothing but death will sever."' "

'A sacred fiddlestick,' observed Gresham, contemptuously. Then, after a pause, 'Who is that yonder, going over the hill?'

'It is Gilbert Holm. He is bound for the shore, I reckon, to see if there is any flotsam or jetsam from the wreck. He had much better trust to his farm for his profits, than to such waifs and strays.'

'Ay, he's another of Walcot's *protégés*, is he not?'

'I don't know about that,' said the Curate, 'but he has great influence over him, as he has over every one else, and I wish he would use it to persuade him to give up taking brandy of a morning. I shall see you again in an hour or two, no doubt, Gresham. Good morning.'

The tone of the Curate was cordial, much more so, had Gresham been aware of his feelings towards Evelyn than his companion had any right to expect; for what is more calculated to raise the spleen than to suspect the object of our affections to be held but lightly in those of our successful rival? Even as it was, Gresham acknowledged to himself what a worthy, modest, and high-souled fellow Dyneley was, and how incapable of a baseness. This last reflection was, perhaps, suggested by a prick of conscience, for Gresham did not in his heart approve of that policy of silence—not to say deception—which he had chalked out for himself in the future as respected Elise. He was by nature, as his uncle had called him, frank. The story Mr. Walcot had narrated respecting his behaviour at the Homburg gaming-table had been, to say the least of it, distorted to his disadvantage; he was too impulsive for duplicity, though a certain weakness of character might, as in the present case, suggest concealment.

Nor must it be supposed that George Gresham had, in his

advances to Elise, acted disloyally towards Evelyn. Not only had he not broken troth—for troth had never been plighted between them, but he had done her no tacit wrong; there was no mutual understanding between them whatever, such as lovers use, and though they had been drifting towards Matrimony, it was without aid of sail or oar, and merely from the wind and tide of circumstances. They were both aware that marriage was expected of them by others, and they had not actively opposed themselves to the pressure from without, but that was all. Gresham was not aware that Evelyn had ever stated 'I am not engaged,' but he knew that she did not acknowledge an engagement. Nor had she once given him, during all the years they had known one another, such looks or words as Elise had bestowed upon him within the last few hours. He felt less self-reproach, in fact, as respected her than as respected others—such as his uncle and her mother, but with these he was undoubtedly about to play, if not falsely, a false part.

The adults of the Hall party were already downstairs, despite the earliness of the hour, eager to hear the news from Mirton, and their astonishment was great indeed at finding it was Gresham who had brought it.

'What, *you* here?' 'George!' 'Good Heavens!' and 'This is unexpected, indeed'—the last and least enthusiastic greeting being Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's.

The ladies kissed him, of course. Lady Arden with a stately affection, befitting a mother-in-law *in posse*; as well as a step-nephew *in esse*; Milly with lively effusion; and Evelyn, not as some young ladies kiss 'tall Irish cousins whom they love in a sisterly way,' but with a certain gentle decorum for which he could have hugged her—it so convinced him that she didn't care twopence about him.

'And is the poor girl safe?' were her first words.

'Quite safe; I left her in Mrs. Marvell's hands at the "Golden Lion."'

'*You* left her? Why how did you know who she was?' inquired Lady Arden.

'I—oh—well,' stammered Gresham, 'we became acquainted

on the voyage, you know ; it was not like an ordinary passage, you must remember.'

'Indeed it was not,' sighed Evelyn. 'Shall I ever forget last night, and that wave-swept wreck with the poor creatures clinging to it !'

'Yes,' cried Milly, 'and yet we did not know that you were there, George. Fancy what our feelings would have been had we been aware of that !'

'You are very good,' said Gresham, with a bow.

'It is too horrible to jest about, George,' exclaimed Sir Robert, reprovingly. 'I saw two poor souls swept into the sea with my own eyes.'

'Yes, indeed, sir, there were more than that. There were many drowned, and but three women saved in all.' Then he proceeded to tell them certain details with which we are more or less acquainted, to which they listened with eager horror.

'But how came you to come by the *Rhineland* at all, George ?' inquired Lady Arden ; 'they tell me it was a cattle ship.'

'Yes, why on earth did you do that ?' said Sir Robert.

'No doubt from motives of economy,' observed Mr. Walcot ; with a dry smile.

'Well, no, it was not exactly that, I must confess,' said Gresham, conscious of a flaming cheek ; 'but being in Rotterdam when the vessel was about to start, a sudden impulse took me. It was not right, because I had promised to meet Mayne in Paris, but no one can say that my perjury went unpunished. I nearly lost my life—I *did* lose every rag belonging to me. I am indebted to Mr. Marvell for the very things I stand up in. They are not fashionable, I know, nor a good fit, but it was something to get into dry clothes of any kind after such a soaking.'

'Then poor Miss Hurt must have lost everything too,' observed Evelyn.

'Very true, Evy,' exclaimed the Baronet. 'You ladies must make contributions from your wardrobes.'

'Is she my size, or Evelyn's, or mamma's ?' inquired Milly roguishly.

'Well, really,' stammered Gresham——

'He is blushing !' cried Milly, clapping her hands.

'I don't see that there could be any harm in your remarking whether she was short or tall,' observed Lady Arden stiffly.

'Certainly not,' continued Milly; 'and since she *was* so communicative, it seems, she may have told him what sized gloves she uses, and from that data we could judge everything.'

'Be quiet, Milly,' exclaimed her mother reprovingly. 'Let George speak for himself.'

'Well, I *think* this young lady is about Milly's size,' replied Gresham, with an air of reflection; 'rather shorter, if anything. I told her, by the bye, that you would send some conveyance for her.'

'Quite right,' said Lady Arden; 'the carriage shall go at once. And Jennings shall go in it with a change of clothes for her.'

'That is just like your thoughtfulness, Lady Arden,' observed Mr. Walcot; 'but if I might venture a suggestion, don't you think that, under the circumstances, if Miss Evelyn herself would not mind the trouble——'

'The very thing I was thinking myself,' interrupted Sir Robert. 'The poor girl would take it so kindly.'

'Oh, indeed!' exclaimed Gresham hastily; 'there is no occasion for that. I am sure she would be quite distressed at such a thing.'

'Still, if Miss Evelyn doesn't mind the trouble,' repeated Walcot.

'There is no trouble in the matter,' observed that young lady quietly; 'and indeed, without wishing to rob Mr. Walcot of the credit due to his forethought, I had made up my mind to go for Miss Hurt, before he spoke.'

If anything could have been a solace to Gresham under such circumstances—for the plan about to be carried into effect was, as may be well imagined, to the last degree distasteful to him—it was the curtness of tone in which Evelyn addressed those words to Mr. Ferdinand Walcot. She was the only inhabitant of the Hall who was able to 'snub' Sir Robert's brother-in-law, or who had the courage to attempt it. His being thus 'set down' was, however, but scanty satisfaction to Gresham as compared with his apprehensions of the dangerous results of Walcot's officiousness. If he had only had the courage to tell Elise



of the *quasi*-engagement existing between himself and Evelyn, it would have put her on her guard ; but—now—what damaging admissions might she not make during that *tête-à-tête*—what questions might not Evelyn put to her in all good faith, and without the least idea that they were ‘leading’ ones ! Moreover, the suggestion of Evelyn’s going to meet the girl was greatly more distasteful to him from its having proceeded from Walcot. Did the man already suspect something ? It was more than possible, for his attitude towards him, in Gresham’s view, was always one of suspicion ; he was certain in his own mind that Ferdinand Walcot was a tale-bearer and an eaves-dropper ; and that the knowledge thus basely acquired had been already used to his prejudice with his uncle. Suppose that this cur, who was also a sleuth-hound, had already smelt out that there was something—something wrong, as he would be sure to term it—between Elise and him ?

## CHAPTER X.

## THE YOUNG PEOPLE.

WE have described the owner of Halcombe Hall, and also him who was practically the master of it ; but we have given them precedence only on the time-hallowed principle of 'Seniores priores.' There was one other individual under that roof, quite as masterful by nature as Mr. Walcot himself, and who was looked up to by the whole family with a reverence accorded to neither of his two rivals. This personage was Babla Nicoll (aged 4), commonly called, half in irony, half in tribute to his social position, the Great Babla. The origin of this name, save that it was begotten of Love and Euphony, was lost, at the time we make acquaintance with him, in the mist of antiquity. It was certainly not given him by his godfather and godmother, who had in fact named him 'Gerald.' Perhaps he was termed Babla after the Great Mogul called Bablo ; and the 'o' had become 'a' by one of those etymological processes so familiar to commentators ; but if so he was a far greater potentate than his prototype. His dominions, indeed, were limited, being bounded on the north, on the south, on the east, and on the west, by the walls of his home, but within that region he was despotic. Nay, like the Czar of Russia, he might be said to be an object of worship. A prophet, we are told, is held in small account in his own country, but the Great Babla, who was oracular upon matters present only (and even on those never distinct), was held at home in a reverence not paid to prophets anywhere, even after the fulfilment of their vaticinations. Even abroad he was thought highly of ; ladies and even ancient gentlemen were wont to stop him in London streets, or at the seaside, when he went forth in his perambulator, to do him homage ; they did not, as in the case of the Holy Pontiff, kiss his toe, for, indeed, that member was not easily approachable, being encased first in a shoe and stock-

ing of extreme diminutiveness, and finally in a gaiter of Shetland wool, but they kissed what they could, and invoked the blessings of Providence upon his sacred person. He was wont neither to approve nor disapprove of these manifestations of public approval; but would 'stare right on with calm eternal eyes,' on some distant object of nature—especially if a dog or a donkey presented itself on the horizon. A philosophic calm was his usual characteristic; but there were chords in his nature, which being struck he was immediately roused to enthusiasm. The sight of Punch's show had quite a galvanic effect upon him; a soldier—such was his peculiarity, that although he had probably never so much as heard of the Amazons, he called him 'a soldier-man'—aroused in him an ardour which it is inadequate to describe as martial; while a monkey on an organ caused him such agitation of mind, as (although evidently pleasurable) gave nervous admirers some apprehension for his precious life.

That he considered himself by very far the most important personage on this terrestrial planet is certain (and no wonder), and we are also inclined to believe that (in spite of appearances) he also deemed himself the first even in chronological order. It was his imperial humour to conceive himself the sole repository of information, and he imparted it in infinitesimal quantities, to the whole world at large, and with the air of a teacher. When a horse passed him, he would observe to his attendants, 'Gee-gee,' with a wave of his small hand, as though to impress it upon their attention. 'I have named that quadruped, you observe' (he seemed to say), 'and mind you don't forget it.' He was equally at home with Science as with Nature, and, on once meeting with a steam-roller in London, remarked, 'Puff, puff,' in a precisely similar manner. Although he did not speak, as other sovereigns do, in the first person plural, he was far from using the ordinary style. He would say, 'Babla will have this and that,' and if it was to be attained by any means within the reach of his loving subjects Babla got it. Like the Persian monarch who flogged the seas and razed the hills, Babla was indignant with Nature herself if his inclinations were thwarted. He was once found, to the great alarm of His Majesty's household, upon a chair, upon

which, finding it near the window, he had climbed, unassisted, in order to reach what he called 'That wound yed ball,' which was the sun—it being an exceptionally foggy day for Halcombe. Upon being informed that this feat was impossible, on account of the height at which that luminary is placed above us, he expressed a passionate discontent with that arrangement, and, I am sorry to add, even with its Author, the Great Architect of the Universe. His views of the Creator, indeed, though tempered with a certain tender awe which was extremely touching, were what High Church divines would consider familiar. Having been told that God lives above us, he for some time regarded the attics with mystic reverence, and approached them when carried up thither with caution. He once remarked that the Supreme Being did not live alone 'up yonder,' but 'along with the joke.'

'Good gracious,' cried his mother, seriously shocked—though his innocent tone and broken accents did in fact rob all remarks that dropped from his baby mouth of their irreverence, 'what *can* the child mean?'

Upon cross-examination of the nurse, it appeared that she had once observed in Babla's hearing that 'she could not see the joke,' and since he had been told that 'we cannot see God,' he had combined his information, and, quite unwittingly, thus associated the Sublime with the Ridiculous.

An infant of such simplicity, and with such original views, would have been popular even among philosophers; it may be imagined, therefore, with what reverence he was regarded by his mother and sisters. We have said, by the way, that Evelyn was the only person at Halcombe Hall who at times opposed herself to Mr. Ferdinand Walcot; let us hasten to repair that error; the Great Babla detested him, and was accustomed to tell him so in broken language, but still sufficiently distinct, 'Oo are a nasty, back ugly man, and I won't kiss you,' a veto that had almost the force of an Excommunication. Mr. Walcot would smile in the tenderest manner at him, and assure him that he could not mean what he said, but the other would answer, 'Babla means it very much,' and intrench himself against his caresses behind the nearest chair.

Then poor Mr. Walcot, adopting the plan he had seen others

use to mitigate his elfin wrath, would pretend to cry, and say, 'Oh, see how I am hurt by your unkindness,' to which his duodecimo enemy would reply, 'Babla sees, but doesn't care.' Then Mr. Walcot would try another tack, and, imitating the child's cross looks and pouting lips, would mimic contemptuously, 'What does Mr. Walcot look like now?'

'He ook like a fool,' would be the crushing rejoinder.

Upon the whole, however unwilling to impute duplicity to a man of such force of character, we doubt whether Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was quite so fond of the Great Babla as he pretended to be.

But all the rest of the household loved him, and none better than his brother Frank. 'The boy that loves a baby' has always good in him, and generally some rare kind of good. Frank was ingenuous and affectionate, but very sensitive, and though 'sharp enough,' as every one allowed, his imaginative powers were greatly in excess of his intelligence; he was passionate and—though his passion lasted but for a minute, and his gentleness filled up the huge interval—this fact was dwelt upon by his detractors. Of these, however, he had not many; and, if it had not been for the greater claims on their devotion, advanced and somewhat insisted upon by the Great Babla, his family would have adored him. There had been as yet but one shadow upon his bright, young life. The incident which had produced it was curious, and even absurd, but the effect had been somewhat serious. Late in the preceding autumn Master Frank had ridden over on his pony to pay a visit to a young friend at his mother's house—a few miles from Archester. He had stopped later than was prudent, and Lady Arden had been greatly alarmed when darkness fell, and the child—for he was then but eight—did not present himself. His pony was a quiet one, and he had ridden it daily for some months; still there was, of course, the danger of his having been thrown. Moreover, though he knew his way over the moor quite well, he did not know it as the curate did, blindfold; and the night was dark. He did turn up about nine o'clock, but in a very strange condition; his mind seemed to have become unhinged, he talked so strangely at first they thought that his friend might have been so imprudent as to have given the lad a glass

of cherry brandy before he set out. And yet his behaviour was not that of one intoxicated. The doctor, who was sent for, pronounced that he had received some shock to his system. He might have been pitched off his pony, on his head, he thought, and then got on again unconsciously.

His story, told in a boyish disconnected way, but one which never wavered as to the facts, was this: He had started after dusk, but had no difficulty in keeping to the sand road, nor felt any apprehension in his own mind as to reaching home. He did not like the darkness that was falling about him—he never did like being in the dark—but on this occasion he protested that he had not felt afraid. Suddenly, as he reached the spot where the road branched to Mirton, he came upon this spectacle: a giant moving slowly through the mist, upon six legs. Of course the pony was frightened, and started off at such speed that he was wholly unable to restrain him, but he was not one half so frightened as his rider. At the mere narration of what he had seen, indeed, the blood fled from the boy's delicate cheek, and his voice shook with horror.

'I saw it,' he asserted solemnly, 'as plainly as I see you, mamma; the creature was as tall as one tall man pick-a-back on another, and had six legs; the two in the middle thinner than the two outside.'

To this legend he had clung with such tenacity that no argument could shake his conviction; and he had become in some sort a martyr to his faith. If there was one thing Sir Robert was slow to forgive, it was a falsehood; and there could, unhappily, be no doubt that the giant with six legs could not have truth for its foundation. There was, indeed, an apparent absence of motive for such a monstrous fiction, but this had been supplied by a mind fertile in imputing motives.

'I do not take the severe view of Frank's peccadilloes that you do, Arden,' Mr. Walcot had said, when privately consulted on the matter by his brother-in-law; 'but, on the other hand, I see a quite sufficient reason for his having invented the story. The lad knew that he had transgressed his mother's commands by remaining with his young friend so late; and his object was to substitute sympathy for reproof. He felt, if he could persuade us he had been desperately frightened, that that would

be considered punishment enough ; and having a strong imagination, and a mind stored with histories of Jack the Giant Killer, and similar worthies, he evoked a giant out of his own consciousness. He has been too long in the nursery, and ought to be sent to school.'

'He is so delicate, and gets on so well with his lessons at home, I am told,' answered Sir Robert, dubiously.

'I know Lady Arden is opposed to his leaving home and "roughing it" in any way,' observed Mr. Walcot, quietly ; 'but as you were saying, a habit of falsehood must be eradicated at any sacrifice.'

'Did I say that? I had no idea of having done so ; but I was certainly thinking something of the kind. How unconsciously thought weds itself with speech ! How strange is our mental mechanism !'

'I am afraid Frank's story was not put together in that unconscious manner,' said Walcot, smiling.

'No, indeed ; I fear not. Yes, I will certainly speak to my wife about sending him to school. Your opinion, Ferdinand, will, I am sure, have its due weight with her.'

'Pardon me, Arden ; but I had rather you left me and my opinion out of this question. It is a purely domestic one ; you, of course, have every right to propose—nay, to dictate—the course I have ventured to suggest. But your wife would naturally resent any interference in such matters on my part.'

If it had not been for an opposition on Lady Arden's part much more strenuous than she was used to exhibit, Frank would have gone to school after his meeting with that giant ; but as it was, he still remained at home.

One of the future duties of Miss Elise Hurt would be to teach him German. In the meantime, he learnt readily enough whatever his sisters could impart to him ; but the effect of such tender teaching and environments was somewhat to increase a certain constitutional effeminacy. When Sir Robert once spoke with admiration of Frank's devotion to his little brother, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot observed that it was, indeed, a pleasant spectacle to see them together ; 'one would think,' he said, 'they were almost of the same age ; but, for all that, it



was doubtful whether it was advantageous for a lad of nine to be so very childish in his pursuits.'

These words of wisdom were a little hard on the elder lad ; for the share he took in his brother's pleasures was solely in order to increase them. The Great Babla (like other princes of a larger growth) was never so happy as when marshalling his army of tin soldiers in the tented field, with Frank by his side, as *aide-de-camp*, to pick up the fallen, and set them on their pins again. After Frank had done his lessons, he always placed himself at his brother's service for an hour before he went out to take his own amusements. He had done so on the morning when Evelyn had gone to Mirton to fetch Miss Hurt, and had promised the Great Babla to come in betimes to help fire the battery (of peas) against the invading army (twenty-three top-heavy men in green), and finish the campaign with a pitiless slaughter. A plan which, unhappily for both parties, was not destined to be carried out.

Frank's first thought, on getting free from his military duties, was to go down to the Point to see whether any of the wreck had come ashore ; and, in order to enhance this pleasure, he had called on his way at the gardener's cottage to pick up Jem Groad, the only playmate of his own age that Halcombe could supply. Jem and he were singularly antipathetic ; the former being a stout, unimaginative lad, of a sullen disposition, which he probably inherited from his father. Mr. John Groad was an excellent gardener, and he knew it. Upon the rare occasions when he was reproached by his mistress for not having fruit or flower in such perfection as they were produced elsewhere, he intrenched himself behind the lines of incredulity.

'But Mr. Merrick, as well as his gardener,' she would say, 'have both assured me, John, that such-and-such is the case ; the flower *does* grow in that soil, or the fruit *has* attained to these dimensions.'

'I tell you what it is, my lady,' John Groad would reply, leaning on his spade ; 'they lies.' The assertion was unanswerable ; but it was not courteous. Nor was courtesy his *forte* at any time. He was one of those dogged, ungracious persons whom human nature (which has more charity for such characters than for more agreeable ones) concludes to be 'honest as

the day' since, if not that, it is clear that they ought to be hung. And Jem Groad was John in miniature.

The cottage was scrupulously clean; but, though its inmate was understood by envious neighbours to have money laid up in the bank, it had no trace of ornament. It had not even a flower in it, a circumstance, however, which might have arisen from Mr. Groad's having too much to do with flowers professionally to care to look on them in his leisure hours. A large black parrot, however—the terror of the village children, and darkly whispered by their seniors to be the Fiend incarnate and in feathers—swung from the ceiling in a wicker cage. Mr. Groad had purchased it of a shipwrecked mariner at Archester for two-and-six-pence, and had taught it his own language.

'We are all for ourselves here,' was its hoarse welcome to Frank as he opened the cottage door. 'All for ourselves; all for ourselves; yes, yes.'

It had made the same observation too many times before to attract that young gentleman's attention.

'Now, Jem,' cried he, gleefully, 'give up your tato'-paring and come down to the wreck.'

As a matter of fact, no proposition could have been more agreeable to the youth addressed, but, like some full-grown people of my acquaintance, it was his humour never to appear grateful for any suggestion.

'What's the good o' wrecking to me,' he said; 'if I was your uncle and lord o' the manor, then I should like 'em well enough; "all findings keeping" with him, for that's the law.'

'Well, whatever you find this morning you shall keep, Jem, that I promise you,' said Frank, assuringly.

'There'll be no corpses, that's for certain,' responded the other, doggedly. 'Father says as the life boat took away whatever was worth taking.'

'What on earth would you do with a corpse if you found it?' inquired Frank, with a look of disgust, not unaccompanied, however, by a certain morbid curiosity.

'Well, I'd empty his pockets, that is what I'd do with a corpse; but I tell 'ee there'll be no such luck.'

'Let's hope for the best,' said Frank, secretly much resigned to

this stroke of misfortune, but eager to conciliate his morose companion, 'come along.'

Jem Groad came along accordingly, though still in an aggrieved and sulky mood. Stronger and more inured to toil than his aristocratic companion, he made much better running up the steep hill. 'You needn't cut away from a fellow,' gasped poor Frank.

'You got neither legs nor wind, you ain't,' replied the other, contemptuously.

'I can run as fast as you and faster,' answered Frank, with irritation, 'but I'm tired this morning with sitting up all night at the Mill.'

'Tired with sittin' up! Bah, if you had stood on the quay for six hours and more, as I did, you might talk of tired.'

They had now reached the church-yard, close to which a stream, which fed the mill, ran rapidly down to the sea. About half-way down a dam had been formed, over which was a narrow foot-bridge, always an attraction to the boys from its obvious danger.

'Now I will race you to the mill-dam,' cried Frank, who was swift of foot.

'Bah, any fool can run,' rejoined Master Groad, whose *forte* was less speed than endurance.

Nevertheless, off they started like greyhounds from the leash. Frank first reached the goal, but in a very distressed condition; he held on to the rail of the foot-bridge and breathed in gasps. His rival arrived three seconds afterwards, but with quite a superfluity of breath in him, which he at once applied to purposes of disparagement.

'Yes, you can run; of course, you can run. It is well for you, since you can't fight.'

This was very hard, because the other could not answer him except by pants. He *looked*, however, pugnacious enough.

'Ah, you may grin' (he had not *meant* to grin at all), 'but you're a molly-coddle. I don't wonder that they call you Nell'—he would have said Nelly, but Frank's fingers throttled him at the first syllable. He had flown at him like a young cat-a-mountain. The next moment the two boys were sprawling on the slippery bridge, in a struggle in which the rules of battle, as

laid down in 'Fistiana,' were grievously neglected. On one side there was no rail at all, but very deep water, which rushing under the bridge fell through a grating into the mill pool below. Thus whoever was once sucked in, no matter how great his swimming powers, must needs perish, since there was no egress. The combatants recked nothing of this, till one of them—Jem Groad—slipped over; his legs went instantly away from him, under the bridge which his hands still clutched in desperation.

Frank, on his part, frenzied with fear, seized him by the hair, and roused the echoes with screams for help. Had he loosed his hold for an instant, or if Jem's hair should show a sign of what the barbers call 'weakness at the roots,' the latter would have at once discovered whether the black parrot had been libelled or not by public report. He would have been bound for Tartarus to a certainty.

On the hill top, some quarter of a mile away, two men had been conversing for some time: one evidently a student, or man of thought, the other an agriculturist.

'The hay was bad,' the former had been saying; 'and that was not the worst of it. It was half a load short of the quantity.'

'There must have been some mistake, sir,' replied the other deferentially, and very pale.

'The law calls such mistakes by the name of fraud. You cheated Sir Robert about the cows you sold for him at Archester.'

'I charged him a few shillings for the commission, sir; that was all.'

'You lie, Gilbert Holm. You put ten pounds of his into your own pocket.'

'Oh, pray, Mr. Walcot, have mercy upon me for this once.'

'I have not made up my mind as to that,' was the cool rejoinder.

'I will be your slave for life if you will not expose me——'

At this moment a piercing cry for help came up to them from below.

'Good God! Mr. Walcot, there is some one drowning. It is little Frank.'

He would have rushed off in aid at once, impelled, it is just to say, by natural instinct, though upon its heels came the selfish reflection, 'Here is an opportunity for laying Sir Robert under a life-long obligation, and covering all my peccadilloes against him.'

Perhaps the same thought occurred to his companion, for a hand was laid upon his wrist, and a voice more potent than the grasp restrained him.

'It is not Frank, you fool. It is the gardener's boy.'

'But, sir, he is drowning!' ejaculated the other with dismay that fell little short of horror.

'True; you had better save him. Go.' As the speaker's hand released him, Gilbert Holm bounded towards the bridge.

The ground was in his favour, and he ran like a deer, but he was only just in time. Two seconds more of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's converse, always momentous as it was, would on this occasion have weighed down a human life.

Breathless and dripping Jem was hauled out of the hungry current, and deposited upon the grassy bank; his face was almost as cadaverous as one of those human flotsam and jetsam which he had lately evinced such a desire to come across.

'Oh, Jem, dear Jem,' cried Frank, kneeling by his side, and weeping bitterly, 'do tell me you are not dead.'

'If I'm not, it's no thanks to you;' growled the object thus addressed. 'He tried to drown me, Mr. Holm.'

'Oh what a wicked story,' exclaimed Frank.

'We'll see what the policeman says about that,' murmured Jem. His eyes were still closed, but he dimly saw his way to pecuniary compensation for having been worsted in his late encounter.

'Come, come, young Groat,' said Holm, 'it was a fair tussle between you, only you must needs take a slippery plank to try your strength upon.'

'You were not near enough, John, to be sure of that,' put in a grave voice. 'Let us be careful not to side unjustly with the rich against the poor.'

'That's just it, Mr. Walcot,' groaned the dripping one. 'It's because I'm only a gardener's son, that he thought nothing of drowning me; oh, please to fetch a policeman.'

'But I *didn't* try to drown him,' exclaimed Frank, appealingly; 'upon my word and honour I didn't. It was terrible to see him fall into the dam, and I held on to him all I could.'

'He cort hold of me by the hair,' muttered Jem, complainingly. 'He tried to pull it out by the roots. Oh, where is the policeman?'

'It is a sad case altogether,' observed Mr. Walcot. 'It is for your father, Groad, to take what steps he pleases; you may tell him that much from me.'

'Oh, Mr. Walcot,' cried Frank, despairingly, 'do you then believe it possible that I tried to drown him?'

'My dear Frank, I cannot look into your conscience. But I know you often give way to uncontrollable fits of passion, such as lead men and boys to manslaughter, if not to murder.'

'Yes, Mr. Walcot, it was murder,' exclaimed Jem, with eagerness. 'Let him give me a sufforin at once, or else I'll send him to the gallows.'

'It is much too serious a case for compromise,' sighed Mr. Walcot. 'The law does not permit it. Go home, Groad, and send your father to me. As for you, Frank, you had better not return till your usual time, lest suspicion should be aroused at once against you. Go away into some solitary place and think over your hasty temper and the fearful consequence to which it has led.'

'Oh, Mr. Walcot, I am so sorry,' sobbed the terrified Frank, 'I will never be angry again, and I will do everything you bid me, always, if you will only protect me this time.'

'I will do what I can, Frank, if I see your promised amendment bearing fruit. In the meanwhile you had better say nothing of this to anybody, and I dare say Mr. Holm will be good enough to do the like.'

'I am in your hands entirely, Mr. Walcot,' answered Holm, humbly, as they walked away together, while a smothered sigh betrayed his sense of the literal truth of his reply.

## CHAPTER XI

## THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW.

IN spite of the gentleness of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's manners, and of a certain attraction which he possessed for many persons, he was not without his enemies. His spirit was masterful, and unless he had the mastery he would sometimes become downright antagonistic. His theory of government was something like that of Mr. Carlyle's—a despotism in able hands; but Mr. Walcot's definition would have been still more precise; it was necessary that the hands should be his own, and as they were kept always very neatly gloved, and were gentle, and even carressing, in their touch (unless when 'temper,' in rare cases, got the better of him), his yoke was not as a general rule resented; the majority of those who bore it were not even conscious of its existence, until there came some cause of disagreement; Lady Arden, for example, only perceived that he possessed the art of management in its highest form, and felt indebted to him for its exercise in all affairs of the household. She never dreamt that he was managing *her*. The young ladies, until quite recently, were not of an age to understand the system of government under which they lived, and even the Great Babla was not in rebellion against Mr. Walcot's *regime*, but only against Mr. Walcot. He did not recognise him as a rival sovereign, but only as a big black man who did not find favour in his eyes. Frank had never opposed him, but he had been the involuntary cause of opposition, because he had not been sent to school in accordance with his advice. At the very first opportunity, therefore, as we have seen, the iron hand had made itself felt through the velvet glove. From henceforth Frank was in his power, as other persons of a larger growth were.

He had all sorts of ways of catching his birds; if they flew headlong into his net, as in Frank's case, without even a lure,



so much the better ; it saved trouble, and left no traces of the lime. He never frightened them before he caught them—if he could possibly help it. But he had had some little trouble (and foresaw more of it) with one charming little songster, upon whose capture he had set his heart.

There had been a time when Evelyn Nicoll had delighted in having Uncle Ferdinand (so she had then called him) for her companion, when she had liked no one better—not excepting even George Gresham—at her pony's bridle rein in her rambles on the moor ; she had listened to his fanciful weird stories with an interest that fell little short of enchantment ; she had hung upon his lips, as he discoursed with knowledge, admirably suited to her capacity, upon bird, and beast, and tree, with a child's hero worship, and he had flattered himself that he had only to put forth his hand to make her captive.

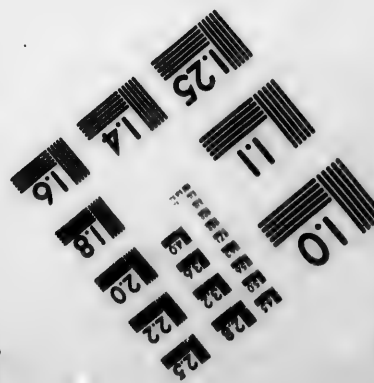
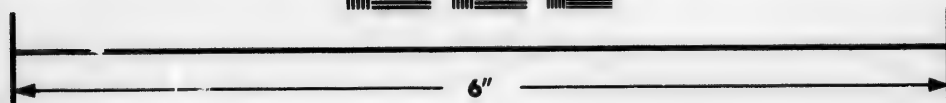
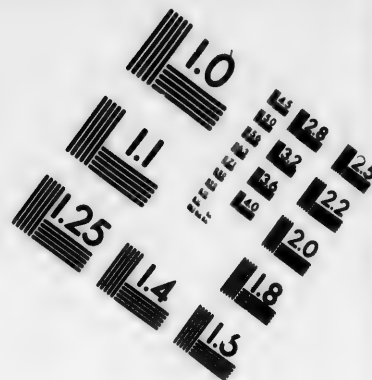
Circumstances had occurred, perhaps, to hurry his ordinarily cautious movements, or perhaps he grew impatient to make sure, but certain it was that—quite in these later days—she had escaped his fingers. She had not got away, of course—he would have smiled at the possibility of such an occurrence—but something or other had given her an alarm. Only instead of fluttering (as some had done under the like circumstances) with beating heart and frightened eyes, she had become as hostile as a ruffled swan. He felt that he had all his work to do over again, though in a different manner. And not only was the iron hand in this case out of the question, but if he could have used it he would not have done so, for this bird, as sometimes happens, though very, very rarely, had caught the bird-catcher.

We have said that the only tenant of Halcombe Hall who was in open opposition to Ferdinand Walcot was Evelyn Nicoll, but there had been another rebel, who was now once more under that roof—namely, George Gresham ; and in his case the bird-catcher felt no scruples. There was, in fact, a bitter quarrel between them, though known only to themselves ; under the mask of a somewhat strained politeness they hated one another most cordially, and offered one more example of the fact that there is no war so virulent as civil war. It was an unequal combat, because one of the belligerents was

more unscrupulous than the other : when one side poisons wells and the other shrinks from it, the former has a positive though an undue advantage ; but for all that, George Gresham was no despicable foe. The very impetuosity of his assaults, which excited the other's contempt, rather than his apprehensions, did considerable execution. To his intimates (as we have seen) George Gresham made no secret of his conviction that Ferdinand Walcot was a scoundrel ; and to every one else he made it clearly understood that he regarded him with no favour. There had been a time when on one side, at all events, considerable conciliation had been attempted. As a boy, not yet emancipated from school, George had been the recipient of Mr. Walcot's generosity. The 'tips' he had given him were, indeed, much larger than were prudent to be entrusted to such young hands ; and he had given him to understand that he might count upon whatever he wished to obtain from his uncle, provided it was applied for through Ferdinand Walcot. To the schoolboy this arrangement seemed agreeable enough ; but as he grew older, he began, as the only blood relation of his uncle, to resent the proviso attached to it : it seemed not in accordance with the fitness of things that such mediation should be necessary. Hence arose doubts, suspicions, and finally a collision with his late ally. Then war, openly declared upon the young man's side, but apparently declined by the other. Gresham appealed to his uncle, and found him kind, but deaf to all arguments against Walcot.

'You do not understand, my dear boy, the nobility of that man's nature ; the thought of self is foreign to it.' And then that stereotyped phrase of his, delivered with pathetic solemnity, 'There is a sacred tie between us.'

Mr. Walcot, though not put upon his defence, volunteered some statements as to his motives ; he could afford to leave them to Sir Robert's interpretation, he said, but it was quite possible George had failed to appreciate them. Sir Robert was his own kith and kin, and it was but natural that he should consider things to be his right which were, in fact, not so ; but which in all reason and justice should depend rather upon his own good behaviour. He was not a bad boy—Heaven forbid that should be the case !—but he had serious faults, which he



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(Mr. Walcot) had striven to amend, and received anything but thanks for his pains. He did not, however, want thanks; but only to see such amendment in the lad as would give satisfaction to his uncle. Even in such a small affair as getting up in the morning, and being in time for breakfast, he could not bring himself to turn over a new leaf, though he knew Sir Robert's particularity in the matter.

Now George was a confirmed sluggard, and his accuser knew this to be a crucial test in which he was almost sure to fail. And he did fail; he was fool enough—or, perhaps, obstinate enough—to neglect this simple means of grace which Mr. Walcot had suggested to him. And the little rift thus made between him and his uncle was skilfully widened. He had been withdrawn from Oxford and the companionship of his friend Frederic Mayne, under Walcot's advice, on the pretext of his extravagant habits—a charge he could not deny—and been left in Germany to complete his education. He had visited Halcombe during the vacations, and been received by Sir Robert with his usual kindness—never intermitted, save when he made a late appearance at the breakfast table; and eventually, as we have seen, had been selected to be the future husband of his uncle's favourite, Evelyn. He did not know that from that hour Ferdinand Walcot's dislike of him had been turned to malevolent hate; but he was quite aware that he was his foe. His fearless, careless disposition, however, had led him to pay small heed to this circumstance—preferring to consider the man the enemy of the human race rather than his own—until the present time; when he felt that his secret relations with Elise might expose him to a severe, if not a ruinous, blow.

It was at Walcot's suggestion that Evelyn had gone to fetch her from Mirton; and he therefore awaited their return with a redoubled apprehension. So strong was his presentiment of evil that he walked out upon the moor before the return of the young ladies was expected, in order that his meeting with Elise might have at least only one witness.

His first glance, on meeting the occupants of the carriage, was directed to Evelyn, and it in some sort reassured him. He felt certain, from her quiet look (for she was one who easily

betrayed her emotions) that nothing had passed between her and her companion to pain her. His proposal that they should finish their journey on foot if the visitor was not too fatigued was accepted; and the three young people walked home together.

'I have been trying my German conversational powers with Miss Hurt,' said Evelyn, 'and I find that books cannot teach me to speak a language. I am glad she will find in you, George, at least one person who can talk to her in her native tongue. You must tell her, however, that she must consider herself a missionary in a very benighted land, and not encourage us to be indolent by speaking English.'

'Perhaps it would be better if she concealed her little knowledge of it altogether,' said George, laughing, but not without the reflection that this would be very convenient.

'I am afraid that would savour of duplicity,' said Evelyn, gravely.

Then it flashed like lightning upon Gresham. 'Evelyn *knows*'—he felt that she was alluding to his present conduct. 'I was only joking,' he replied, 'of course, but I will make her understand exactly what you desire.' Then added rapidly in German, 'You will not use your own language more than is necessary, Elise, and in the case of one person, my uncle's brother-in-law, it will be better to conceal your knowledge of English as much as possible. He is the only enemy we have to fear.'

The next moment George Gresham turned scarlet. He saw, by Evelyn's face, not indeed that she had understood his words of caution, for she had not; but that he had missed the first step in his career of secrecy. He had addressed the new governess as 'Elise,' instead of 'Miss Hurt.' At this moment there fortunately occurred a little incident: they met a dog-cart with a groom in it, coming up the steep hill from Halcombe. The man touched his hat respectfully.

'Where are you going, Charles?' inquired Gresham.

'To Archeder, sir, to bring a young person that is expected at the Hall.'

'Oh, to be sure, it is Annabel Spruce,' said Evelyn.

'Then Miss Hurt is not the only stranger, it seems, expected to-day,' observed George lightly.

'Hush, George,' said Evelyn, rapidly. 'It is scarcely necessary to remark on such a coincidence; Annabel Spruce is the new ladies' maid.'

'I am sure our companion is too sensible to be annoyed by any comparison of that sort,' answered Gresham, lightly.

'I hope so,' observed Elise, quietly, in broken English, 'but nevertheless I am deeply sensible of Miss Nicoll's consideration, which is far beyond anything which a person in my position (unless, indeed, she had the happiness to have already known her) could possibly have expected.'

It was now Evelyn's turn to be overwhelmed with confusion.

'I had no idea, Miss Hurt, that you could understand me,' she stammered. 'I was wrong to say that books cannot teach a language. I see now that it depends upon the capacity of the student.'

'Not at all. Miss Nicoll,' answered Elise, gently. 'It depends rather upon the student's necessities. If you had had to learn German in order to earn your bread, you would have acquired it at least as well as I have English.'

Gresham was delighted at the admiration that Elise's talents had thus extorted from Evelyn, and still more at the favour with which she had evidently regarded her. Half his expected difficulties seemed to be already surmounted. At the same time, highly as he estimated Evelyn's nobility of character, he was not a little surprised, supposing that she really guessed how matters stood, that she had acquiesced in them so readily. His *amour propre* perhaps was a little wounded—though he knew Evelyn's affections were not engaged to him—at the quietness (it looked almost like satisfaction) with which she had accepted the knowledge of his attachment to somebody else.



## CHAPTER XII.

## THE LIKENESS.

ON the morning after Elise Hurt's arrival at the Hall, the family were assembled as usual in the oriel breakfast room, awaiting the beat of the gong which summoned the servants to morning prayers ; for a wonder, George Gresham was on this occasion in time for that solemnity ; he had made up his mind to fail in nothing that might give satisfaction to his uncle ; he was full of good intentions of all sorts, among which the virtue of punctuality shone resplendent—and besides, he was very anxious to see Elise. He could indeed say nothing to her beyond a few conventional kind inquiries, and even these were only admissible between the heir of the House and the governess, from the circumstance of their having been half-drowned together, but it was an inexpressible comfort to find himself in her company. She wore a dress of Millicent's, which he probably beheld not for the first time, but which had never before excited his admiration. It seemed to him, in spite of all she had gone through, that she looked fresher and prettier, and altogether more charming, than even when he had first seen her in the church at Rotterdam. If he had not known that Lady Arden and the girls had shown her every kindness, he could have read as much in her grateful and contented look, and he loved them more than ever in consequence.

'Why, George,' exclaimed Sir Robert, delighted to see his lie-a-bed nephew in his place, 'the German air seems to have wonderfully agreed with you ; I never saw you looking so bright and wideawake at this early hour.'

'Let us hope, sir, that that may rather be ascribed to the pleasure of coming home,' answered the young man.

'That's well said,' returned Sir Robert, smiling, 'though I am not so foolish as to take the compliment to myself,' and he looked slyly across the room at Evelyn, who was talking to Elise.

'In your delight at finding yourself once more with your uncle and the rest, you have forgotten your correspondence,' and he pointed to a letter which lay upon Gresham's plate.

Gresham laughed and opened the letter; and then laughed still more.

'It is from dear old Mayne,' he said, 'apologising for not having met me in Paris—which is fortunate, since I did not keep my appointment with *him*. His yacht, it seems, was delayed by the gale, so that he could not get to Boulogne; and now he has got sick of the sea and coming to England.'

'Ask him to come here,' said Sir Robert, 'we shall be very glad to see him.'

'You are very kind, sir,' answered Gresham; 'I am sure he would like nothing better.'

Mr. Walcot, who was as usual engaged on a somewhat voluminous correspondence, looked up at this.

'Are you sufficiently sure of your own movements for that arrangement, Sir Robert?'

'Yes, yes, there is no hurry about that matter; and whether I am at the Hall or not, Mr. Mayne can be made welcome.'

It was a curious instance of the ascendancy which Mr. Ferdinand Walcot exercised at Halcombe, that this vague hint was the first intimation which the rest of the family, including even Lady Arden, had received of Sir Robert's having any intention of leaving home. His post of *confidant* to the Baronet was so well established, that no observation was made upon this piece of news by anybody. The only astonishment it excited was in George Gresham, who, having been so long away, was less accustomed to such proofs of Mr. Walcot's sway.

'If Mayne comes here,' thought he, 'he will fall out with that fellow, I reckon;' and the idea greatly enhanced the pleasure with which he looked forward to his friend's visit.

Then the servants trooped into prayers, taking their places so quickly that it reminded you, with but a slight difference, of the stage direction in *The Critic*, 'enter kneeling.' A certain new face among them was, therefore, not at once observable to the master of the House, who besides, had his book-markers—long silk streamers worked by Evelyn in the High Church style—to arrange. Sir Robert had a fine voice, and what is more,

one instinct with deep religious feeling. At a later part of the short service, when all stood up, his tall delicate figure, with his reverential face and tone, had a fine effect. He looked a true Head of a Household, to whom the welfare, ghostly and bodily, of every member of it was of genuine interest. Suddenly his voice began to fail and quiver.

Mr. Walcot was at his side in an instant.

'Go on for me, Ferdinand,' he whispered, and sat down.

Lady Arden also approached him, but he waived her away.

'It is only a little giddiness, my dear. Ferdinand will finish the reading.' And he did so. Mr. Walcot also was a fine reader; a better one, perhaps, artistically speaking, than his brother-in-law; but the late occurrence had somewhat disturbed the attention of the little congregation.

'It was nothing,' said the Master of the House, when prayers were over, and in answer to the anxious looks of those around him rather than to their inquiries; for it was well understood that Sir Robert disliked fuss to be made about his ailments, 'I was a little faint, I think, for want of my breakfast.'

If this was so, it was curious, since he made no attempt to eat anything beyond toying with a little toast and marmalade; but of this no one was supposed to take notice.

He was the first to rise from table, and Lady Arden followed him with her eyes, but with her eyes only. Mr. Walcot had already risen, leaving his devilled chicken only half consumed upon his plate, and left the room close at Sir Robert's heels.

Again no one hazarded a remark, but Gresham glanced significantly at Elise, as much as to say, "You see his power;" and then turned scarlet on perceiving Evelyn remarked it.

Lady Arden showed no touch of annoyance, nor perhaps did she feel any. She had been long content with the affection of her second husband, shown in a hundred material ways to her and hers; she had never possessed his confidence; and on the few occasions when she had striven to minister to him in his little troubles—which were generally understood to be 'nerves'—she had not been very successful. She was homœopathic, and had suggested Pulsatilla, in which Sir Robert did not seem to have much confidence.

The Baronet passed through the folding-doors that led into his own study—which stood somewhat isolated from the house, forming one of his many projections—and threw himself into a chair.

‘Great Heaven, Ferdinand,’ were his first words, ‘why did you not tell me!’

‘Tell you what, my dear Arden!’ inquired the other, with simplicity.

‘Why, about the likeness. That girl who came yesterday. I thought when I saw her face I should have dropped.’

‘Do you mean Annabel Spruce?’

‘Of course I do. Is it possible it never struck you that she is the very image of our lost Madeline?’

‘The image? Surely not. Now you mention it; indeed, I do recall a resemblance—something in the look of the eyes.’

‘The eyes! the features—the very expression!’

‘My dear Arden—making every allowance for your sensitive organisation,’ answered Mr. Walcot, in a tone of alarmed remonstrance; ‘it seems to me that your affectionate, nay, your devotional feelings towards our dear departed carry you sometimes too far. Remember, it is I alone who understand them, who appreciate them at their full value; and this exhibition of them before others——’

Sir Robert waved his hand in nervous protest.

‘What does it matter—what does anything matter, in comparison with what I owe to her!’

‘Very true, my dear Arden; most true, no doubt. Still, you have since contracted other obligations.’

‘I know it; I know it,’ exclaimed the other impatiently; ‘and I hope I have not neglected them.’

‘Indeed you have not; no other man alive could have been so mindful of them.’

‘Still I was wrong to contract them. I failed in fealty to the dead—if, indeed, I can call her dead, whose living voice is so present with me.’

‘Why did you do it, my dear friend?’ answered the other bluntly.

‘Ay; why, indeed? I did it to escape from myself. You

don't know what I suffered when she left me all alone. You were not here then, Ferdinand, to comfort me.'

'I wish I had been, with all my heart.'

The gentleness of his tone was only equalled by its genuineness; Sir Robert held out his hand, and the other grasped it warmly.

'I have no cause to complain, Ferdinand, of any human creature, save myself. Lady Arden and the children have been everything that I could have expected of them—more than I had any right to expect. My nephew, too, dear George, is an honest, noble fellow. You don't think so, because you compare him, perhaps, with an ideal standard—he has not, of course, your sensibility.'

'I said nothing against him, Arden; and I never shall do so. If I think he fails towards you in frankness and obedience, considering all the benefits you have heaped upon him, that is only my private opinion.'

'Well, well, let us not talk of that, let us agree upon that single point to differ. In all others we are at one.'

'I hope so, indeed, my friend.'

'But oh, that girl! Why did you not prepare me for her? When she turned round and looked at me it was as though one had risen from the dead.'

'I grant there is a likeness, though it did not strike me with such force. If it pains you I will frame some excuse to persuade Lady Arden to get rid of her *protégée*.'

'No, no, no,' answered Sir Robert. 'Let her stay here since she has come. The very accident of resemblance gives her a claim upon me.'

Mr. Walcot bowed, with a stoop of his shoulder too gentle to be called a shrug; the action seemed to say, 'This is a matter of feeling in which no one has a right to argue with you; but to me such ideas are unintelligible.'

'My dear Ferdinand, I know I must seem unreasonable to the world at large,' said Sir Robert, as if in answer to this movement, 'but I should have hoped that you would have understood me better. You yourself are cognisant of many things beyond the ken of grosser minds.'

'I have been witness to several manifestations, Arden, it is

true, that I cannot refer to any known laws, and those manifestations have, as it seemed, been connected with my lamented sister. But I hesitate to attach to them any vital meaning.'

'That is because you are by nature a sceptic—that is to say, of a too logical mind, Walcot. Yet you have allowed to me that you have more than once been staggered. After all, these incidents are only links of a chain that has connected this world with the other throughout all ages.'

'Still, the hearing is a sense that is very easily deceived, my dear Arden. I have thought oftentimes I have heard dear Madeline's voice; but it might not have been hers; nay, there might have been no voice. The eye brings with it what it sees, we are told; and this is still more true with the secondary senses. If she were to tell me something only known to myself and her—if I had even seen her——'

'That may happen yet, who knows?' interrupted the other, eagerly, and yet with a touch of awe. 'An angel touched Elijah and Daniel, and though it is true I am no prophet, why should not Madeline, who is an angel, favour me with her visible presence? She comes to see me in dreams.'

'In a dream Milton saw his "late espoused saint,"' observed Walcot softly.

'Yes, but Oberlin tells us that *his* watched him like an attendant spirit, held communion with him, and was visible to his sight. When he contemplated any important act she either encouraged him or checked him.'

'That was a very remarkable case, no doubt, Arden; I remember something of it.'

This might well have been, since his companion had conversed with him on the matter half a dozen times before.

'But Oberlin's experience does not overthrow my argument, though I grant it weakens it, as to the self-deception of the senses.'

'That is what was said to Oberlin himself,' answered Sir Robert, in a tone of triumph; 'when asked how he distinguished such interviews from dreams, he answered, "How do you distinguish one odour from another?" They were perfectly distinct occurrences.'



'He was a theologian and a philanthropist, and probably of an enthusiastic temperament,' replied Walcot doubtfully.

'Well, I am neither one nor the other, Ferdinand; you must grant to me an unbiassed, if not a logical, mind.'

'I will go further, Arden, and allow you to be logical; I never knew a man more open to reason. It is not my wish, you may be sure, to rob you of any source of consolation, and least of all of one which may proceed from kin of mine. If this thing be really as you conceive it to be, I should almost feel that I had a hand in it; that your friendship for me had at all events received the seal of approval from a quarter which, in your eyes—'

'It does—it has, Ferdinand,' interrupted Sir Robert eagerly.

You are dear to me for your own sake; but ten times dearer because of the sacred tie that connects us—we cannot speak of that, however, before others. Lady Arden, for example, would not only fail to understand it, but would perchance resent it. I should be loth to give her cause of pain. You had better go to her, by the bye, and say that I am better, and will see her now.'

'I will.'

We have said Mr. Ferdinand Walcot had a mobile face. It changed its expression twice between Sir Robert's study and the breakfast room. In the former it implied tender assent; between the double doors it became like the mask of Grecian Comedy, grotesque in its satirical mirth; and then, in the presence of the family, it turned to cheerful contentment.

'Sir Robert would like to see you, Lady Arden; his giddiness, I am thankful to say, has passed away.'



## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE FIRST BLOW.

IT was not very long after breakfast, and while Mr. George Gresham was completing on the terrace behind the Hall that second cigar which his new cares and dangerous position had rendered necessary—for without tobacco how would some people contrive to think?—when Milly Nicoll came out to him, not trippingly as usual, but gliding like a ghost, and with quite a serious expression of countenance.

‘George, dear, there are plots in the air,’ she said. ‘And I don’t think you will see your friend, Mr. Mayne, on this side of Christmas.’

‘What do you mean, Milly? I have my uncle’s permission to invite him!’

‘You mean you *had* it. Mr. Walcot, however——’

‘Confound his meddling,’ ejaculated Gresham, prescient of what was coming.

‘By all means,’ said Milly, ‘if that can be done. He has persuaded Mamma that Papa is not in a state of health to receive visitors, and you can therefore guess the next step.’

‘He is the most impertinent wretch!’ exclaimed Gresham, passionately.

‘Oh, George, how can you use such words! If I had known you would be so angry, I would not have been the one to tell you this bad news. I was afraid it would annoy you.’

‘Annoyance is no word for it, Milly. Of course it is a disappointment to me, but that is nothing to the indignation I feel against the person who has caused it. I will go to my uncle at once, and ask whether in future I am to consider him or Mr. Walcot the master of this house.’

‘You would gain nothing by that motion, George. But if you are very anxious to see your friend at Halcombe——’

‘Well, of course I am; but long before the post goes out a veto will be put upon my asking him.’

'Just so. But there is a horse in the stable, and you know how to ride, I believe.'

'It is not a sea-horse that I can ride to Boulogne upon, Milly.'

'No, but you can ride to Mirton, and telegraph to Boulogne, silly.'

'Excellent girl!' cried Gresham, rapturously; 'if you were a little better looking I could find it in my heart to kiss you.'

'He is the most impertinent wretch!' exclaimed the young lady, as if to space, and mimicking the fiery tone as well as the words of her companion.

'Seriously, Milly, I am charmed with your sagacity, and I am sure it will please Mayne to hear that you had so set your heart on seeing him, that you devised this scheme. I'll be off at once.'

'Now that is so like a man,' observed Milly, sardonically; 'first, in the ingenuity, and, secondly, in the want of intelligence. Why, you're actually going to the stables by the front of the house.'

'True, I will go by the back way. You are an angel, Milly, with the wisdom of the serpent added.'

'And look here, George,' she added, as he was hurrying away, 'if you are very anxious about your friend's coming, you had better prepay his message back. When he has said, "I'll come," Papa can scarcely say he is not to come.'

'An excellent notion, my dear girl. You are a Machiavelli!'

'I'll tell Papa if you call me such names as that,' replied the young lady, demurely.

'She is too clever by half; I shall pity her husband,' said Gresham to himself, as he passed through the garden gate.

We have said that on the moorland above Halcombe there were no trees; on the extreme edge of the cliff, on the Mirton side of the village, there was, however, a notable exception to this circumstance, a long, though narrow, plantation of Scotch firs had been planted there by some previous tenant of the Hall, to which it formed a most picturesque approach. For more than a mile the traveller could ride or drive in shelter, while enjoying the most exquisite glimpses of marine scenery. It was called 'The Wilderness,' and was the favourite haunt of the children of the village.

It was still early in the afternoon when Gresham arrived at the entrance of this grove on his return journey. The wind had dropped, and only sighed through the branches of the trees, like an echo of the waves beneath. The sweet breath of the pines, the warmth of the shelter they afforded after the open moorland road, were so grateful to the traveller that he almost always drew rein as he entered the Wilderness, and came through it at a foot-pace. Notwithstanding his familiarity with the scene, this was now the case with Gresham, though it is doubtful whether the slackening of his speed was solely due to the attractions of Nature. As he reached this first jut of home it was natural that the consideration of his position there and of his future prospects should have suggested themselves, and a gallop (which had hitherto been his pace) is no aid to reflection.

He was still full of indignation against Walcot, but he perceived how dangerous it would be to give expression to it, considering the obvious increase of that person's influence with Sir Robert since he (Gresham) had left home, and especially in view of his own relations with Elise. If these should be discovered, they would afford a dangerous weapon, indeed, to the hand of such an unscrupulous foe. Gresham knew that he was solely dependent upon Sir Robert, but, to do him justice, that was not the consideration which most affected his thoughts. He was attached to his uncle by bonds of affection as well as of gratitude, and feared his displeasure at least as much as its material consequences. He was well aware too that there were weak points in Sir Robert's character, quite apart from his infatuation with respect to his brother-in-law; that, with all his kindness of heart and indolence, he would at times assert himself in quite a despotic manner; that small annoyances—such as a nephew's not being down in time for morning prayers—put him out excessively; that ridicule of any subject in which he took an interest highly exasperated him; and that certain derelictions from moral duty had in his eyes the blackness of crimes. First among these was the vice of deception. 'If you will only be open with me, George,' his uncle used to say to him as a boy, 'all will be well between us, but never try to deceive me.'

George would perhaps have been open with him now if he had only his uncle to deal with; he knew that he disliked to

be thwarted in anything on which he had set his mind, and that he would especially resent any change of his supposed intentions as regarded Evelyn; but he would have thrown himself on his uncle's generosity, and bared his heart to him—but not for that daw, Ferdinand Walcot, to peck at. He could foresee, only too well, how he and his love would fare, should he venture to confess it under present circumstances, and therefore he resolved to conceal it.

Immersed in these reflections, he came suddenly, at a turn in the winding road, upon Elise herself, accompanied by Frank.

His heart leaped up for joy, but he was too prudent to express it except by the welcome in his eyes. A boy is always a dangerous third party in such interviews, and especially a sharp boy like Master Frank. A certain proverb about 'little pitchers having long ears' passed through Gresham's mind, succeeded by the consolatory reflection, 'that the longest ear that ever British boy wore cannot understand an unknown tongue; Elise and I will talk German.'

Their salutations, however, were made in English, and Elise informed him that the boy had undertaken to act as her cicerone to the beauties of Halcombe, whereupon Gresham, who had swung himself from his horse, and hitched the bridle under his arm, patted Frank on the head with genuine approbation.

The lad, generally quick to appreciate the least kindness of his elders, said never a word, never even stretched forth his hand—a mechanical impulse, one would have thought, to every boy of his age—to pat the mare.

'Why, Frankie, what's the matter? You look glum, as if you'd lost sixpence irrevocably.'

'There is nothing the matter,' said the boy, with nervous haste, 'nothing at all.'

'There is,' observed Elise, in German. 'I never met with a child of his years so dreadfully out of spirits.'

'It is not usual with him,' answered Gresham, indifferently. 'Something has probably gone wrong with his lessons. What a blessed thought it was that prompted him to bring you here; otherwise I know not when I should have had the chance of a word with you. How do you like Halcombe—or rather the Halcombe folks.'

'They are kindness itself,' she answered, earnestly. 'So kind that my conscience pricks me to think that I should be playing any part here that is not an honest one.'

'It is not dishonest, darling; and it will not last long, for they will all soon come to know your worth, and to welcome you as one of themselves.'

Elise shook her head.

'You are too sanguine. If I had known what sort of life your people lead—so far above everything that I have witnessed in my own country, and all of them to the manner born—I should have felt it impossible that I could ever link my lot with yours; if I could have foreseen the consideration and kindness with which I have been treated by them one and all, I would have refused to repay their hospitality with a deceit, however innocent.'

'It is not a deceit, darling; it is only a concealment, and even that would be unnecessary if we had only them to deal with. I say, if my uncle and his people were alone concerned, I would make a clean breast of it to-day, and leave the question of my love to be judged by their own good hearts. But did I not warn you that I have an enemy here? Do you know who it is?'

'Of course I do,' she answered, smiling sweetly; 'if I did not I might hope that I was fancy free.' (Elise, like others of her race, had learned her English with Shakespeare's aid). 'But because you have won my heart, my senses are keen to all that concerns you. Oh yes, I have seen that man's face fixed on yours when you knew it not, and it means mischief—ruin, if he can compass it.'

'You have read him like a book. There are some natures which we must combat in their own way, or submit to be overcome by them. We must meet the serpent with the wisdom of the serpent. He has not heard you talking English, I trust.'

'No; but I have heard him,' answered she, naively. 'He has persuaded Lady Arden that Sir Robert's invitation to your friend—which seemed to give you much pleasure this morning—should be revoked. However, there is some one coming; what will be thought of our walking together thus?'

'No matter; Frankie will explain it. It is my uncle himself—and his shadow.'

The two figures, which had been partially hidden by the trees, came into full view.

'There is Uncle Ferdinand,' cried Frank. 'Oh dear, oh dear!'

'Well, what of him,' exclaimed Gresham, with irritation. 'He won't bite our noses off. What's the matter with the boy? He looks as pale as death.'

'There is nothing the matter,' cried Frank, with the same anxious earnestness. 'Indeed there is not; oh, pray don't tell him there is.'

'Very good, I'll be as dumb as that fir cone. But in return, Frankie, you must tell my uncle how you came to be here with Miss Hurt; else he will think, perhaps, she has been straying out of bounds: don't you see?'

'Yes, yes,' answered the boy, evidently not troubling himself with the reason for this request; 'I will say anything you please to Papa. And George, dear George, if Mr. Walcott should wish me to go to school, don't let Mamma or my sisters vex him any more by their objections. I would rather, much rather, go to school.'

Gresham stared at the boy in astonishment—for it was clear that he was in a state of terror; but his own concerns were just then too pressing to admit of any questioning. The two men were now drawing very near; Sir Robert, as usual with him, partly from a certain hypochondriacal idea that his steps wanted support, and partly from the sense of dependence always experienced in the other's society, was leaning on his brother-in-law's arm, who apparently was speaking rapidly in his ear.

'Don't forget what you are to say, Frankie,' whispered Gresham, hurriedly, and then the two parties met.

Sir Robert looked grave, but, with a courtesy that never forsook him when speaking to one of the opposite sex, expressed his hope that the Wilderness had found another admirer in Miss Hurt.

'It is very beautiful, sir,' said she, and was about to add that she was indebted to Master Frank for her introduction to it; but her pride forbade it. If her employer chose to impute any other cause for her presence in that spot, he might do so.

Sir Robert attributed her hesitation to her imperfect knowledge of the English tongue.



'That is a curious way of taking horse exercise, George,' observed he, drily; 'to go on foot, and lead your nag.'

'I had been out for a ride, sir, on the moor, and meeting Miss Hurt and Frankie in the wood, I joined them.'

'It was I who brought Miss Hurt to see the Wilderness,' said Frank, his delicate face flushing from chin to brow; 'I was showing her over the grounds.'

'Quite right, lad, quite right,' said Sir Robert, patting his head, but speaking absently. He had got something unpleasant to say, a circumstance which always weighed upon his mind till it was done with. 'By the bye, George, I have got something to say to you, which I fear will cause you disappointment. It is with regard to your friend Mayne—the fact is, I'—here he looked uneasily towards his brother-in-law.

'I am sure it will not be necessary, Arden, to go into particulars with your nephew,' put in Mr. Walcot, smoothly. 'The fact is, Mr. Gresham, your uncle is far from well, and the presence of any visitor just now—being a stranger too—'

'No, no,' interrupted Sir Robert, petulantly, 'it is not *that*; I am well enough. But perhaps at some other time, if it's the same to Mr. Mayne; it isn't as if he knew about it, and we were putting him off, you see.'

'Well, unfortunately, sir, he *does* know about it,' answered Gresham, drily. 'Directly you were so good as to ask him—knowing what pleasure he would have in coming to Halcombe, and also that his movements are apt to be sudden—I telegraphed to him at Boulogne, from which place he has wired back to say he will be at Archester in two days.'

Mr. Walcot turned pale with passion.

'Quick as may be your friend Mr. Mayne's movements, I suppose a message could still reach him by the wire to put off his coming!'

'Not unless the wire was attached to his yacht,' returned Gresham, coolly, 'as you may see for yourself.' And he drew from his pocket the return telegram, and placed it in Mr. Walcot's hands.

'Was about to start for Folkestone, but am now off for Archester, which is the nearest port to Halcombe. A thousand thanks to your uncle. Shall be with you on Friday with great pleasure.'



'You seem to be somewhat precipitate in your invitations,' said Mr. Walcot, biting his lip.

'Not at all; if I had been an hour later I should have missed my friend.'

'I did not mean that, sir——'

'Well, well, no matter,' broke in Sir Robert, 'there is no harm done, George. Your friend will be very welcome. Mr. Walcot, let us go on.' And he lifted his hat to the governess, and moved slowly away.

'It is horrible,' ejaculated Gresham, when the pair were out of earshot; 'my uncle is growing a dotard before his time, thanks to that sycophant and scoundrel. However, he has been done this time; the electric telegraph is certainly a great institution.'

Elise glanced at the boy, and then reprovingly at Gresham.

'Oh, Frankie knows what I think of Uncle Ferdinand,' he answered, lightly.

Here a sharp, authoritative cry of 'Frank, Frank,' was heard behind them. It was Mr. Walcot's voice.

The boy started off like a dog that hears its master's whistle.

When he overtook the two men, Walcot held out his hand, in a kindly manner, as it seemed; but when his fingers closed over the lad's, they gave a warning grip.

'Look here, Frankie; you said just now it was you who asked Miss Hurt to take a walk in the wood: did any one tell you to say that?'

'But it really was me who——' The fingers closed upon him like a vice. 'Be so good as to answer my question. Did any one bid you to tell your Papa to say that it was at your invitation that Miss Hurt was here?'

The boy trembled like a leaf as he answered, 'Yes, Mr. Walcot. George told me to say so; but it really was——'

'That will do; take this book back with you. If George or Miss Hurt ask you what you were wanted for, say that I brought it out by mistake and wished to get rid of it; and say nothing about the other matter.' Before the boy was gone he turned to his brother-in-law and said, significantly, 'I was right, you see, Arden. They met by appointment, without doubt.' Sir Robert stuck his stick into the sand and moved on in sombre silence.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE BIRD AND THE BIRD-CATCHER.

IT is extraordinary, considering our fondness for our children, how we ignore their griefs and troubles ; so long as they are under our own eyes, indeed, we may be allowed to be the best judges of the seriousness, or otherwise, of their calamities, but upon once our children leave us for school we become dead to their complaints, or at all events well satisfied with their silence. There are some exceptions, it is true, upon the other side—parents who are always pining after their pretty dears, and solicitous to learn from the schoolmaster's wife whether that cold has ceased, or the hurt in the little finger has healed, but as a general rule, once we put our little ones out to dry nurse—at the Preparatory School or elsewhere—we let things slide. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they slide smoothly enough, and our certificate of approval is added to the collection of parental vouchers on view at the educational establishment to which our young Hopeful has been entrusted. The hundredth case is, however, a sad one. It is that of a child of sensitive organisation, finding himself suddenly removed from the gentle influences of home, and placed in irresponsible and tyrannous hands ; friendless, companionless, the sport of juvenile ruffians, he asks himself, like the innocent but unregenerate babe of Calvinism, ' Why am I in this Tophet ! ' From pride or timidity he remains silent under his persecutions, and is either ruined, morally speaking, for life, or more rarely escapes—murdered, for, though he seems to die of natural causes, it is from a broken heart—into the other world. Shelley and Cowper and Lamb were among the less fortunate ones ; they lived to curse the miseries of their schooldays ; and many a songless poet has shared their fate. Sometimes a boy will hang himself. Imagine the wretchedness that must consume the soul of ' gladsome youth ' before it comes to that pass ! What

are misfortunes of man—his disappointments, failures, bankruptcies, and all the ills to which *grown* flesh is heir, compared to them! Then by way of epitaph it is explained by schoolmasters and others that he was of a 'morose disposition.' Idiots! Not to know that the 'morose disposition' is the toughest of all Nature's gifts; nay, more, that its possessor is the very last to think of hanging himself, but rather intent on pushing all others with whom he comes into contact to that extremity.

The most marked features of these unhappy lads is, that while mere children in the powers of endurance, their intelligence is premature. They are the exact opposites of those restless spirits—a much more useful class I allow—who from their earliest youth are yearning to go to sea—until they get there. The poor little fellows I have in my mind have no desire, as many boys have, to become schoolboys. They know, by an intuition which experience often fails to teach their elders, what they shall like, and what they shall dislike. It is nothing less than a crime—a cruelty of which Heaven only knows the degree—to pluck them from their home garden, without careful attention to the new soil in which they are transplanted. Who would take a fuchsia from a hot-house and plant it in winter, on a Yorkshire moor!

'For my part,' as was once said to me (the speaker was a man well known to all readers of the English tongue), 'I have held my own in the world, and can bite when I am bitten pretty sharply, yet the memories of my schooldays have never faded. I have suffered poverty, and envy, and the deaths of my dear ones, but I have never as a man experienced—never—the unmitigated wretchedness which I suffered in my first years at school.'

Something of this, in a vague way, her mother's heart had taught to Lady Arden, as respected her Frankie, and that was why she kept him at home. Imagine, therefore, her astonishment, when the boy besought her, on the morning after that stroll with Elise into the Wilderness that he might be sent to school forthwith.

'But, my darling Frankie, are you not happy at home?'

Happy! in his simple mind the shadow of the gallows was hanging over him. The voice of Ferdinand Walcot knelled in his ear like the bell of St. Sepulchre; the sight of Jem Groad, or of his father, saturnine and menacing, froze his young blood! Of course, he lied to her. 'Yes, I am quite happy, Mamma, but I am not well. I feel that I should be better away from home—you know Uncle Ferdinand wished me to go,' he stammered.

'The wishes of your Uncle Ferdinand (as you call him) have not the force of law,' observed Lady Arden, bridling up.

There were rare occasions when her ladyship did resent Mr. Walcot's authority, and his interference concerning her son had been one of them. At those words, 'the force of law,' poor Frankie trembled. The power that could send him to prison was of course superior to that of Uncle Ferdinand, but what did that matter, when whether it should be set in motion or not depended upon his will?

'Well, Mamma, at all events don't tell him,' he answered, eagerly; 'don't say that I asked to go to school to anybody, but only let me go.'

'I will certainly not tell your Uncle Ferdinand, but as to the other matter, my dear, I must consider about it. You are getting on so well with your lessons—and Miss Hurt has kindly promised to teach you German—so that it seems such a pity! Is it that you want playmates, that you feel moped? If so, we'll have young Raynes over from The Laurels.'

Frank shook his head.

'Well, then, though I don't much fancy such companionship—I'll tell Groad to give his son a holiday for the next week or two in the afternoons, and he shall play cricket with you.'

'Oh, no, no, no,' exclaimed Frank; 'I don't want to play with Jem Groad at all' (which, indeed, under the circumstances was not to be wondered at). 'What I want to do is to go to school.'

'Very singular; I can't think what has come to the boy,' murmured Lady Arden to herself. 'I'll just have a word with Mr. Dyneley about him.'

It was not from his own lips that Lady Arden had first heard that there was something amiss with the boy. The

Great Babla had already discovered and proclaimed that 'Frank was koss'—and ill-humour was a phenomenon with Frankie. He had not entered into that potentate's military displays of late with his usual vigour of interest, and on the previous evening he had allowed several of his observations to pass unheeded—a crime little inferior to that of high treason.

'I tell you the poor moon is boke,' Babla had observed, in pitiful allusion to the fact that it was not so full as it had been; and Frankie had expressed no sympathy with the moon, having none to spare, poor fellow, on such extraneous objects.

His appetite had fallen away, too; and he had generally a very fair one; indeed, he was something of a *gourmand*, and there were stories extant of his passion for food in early youth, any allusion to which would mortify him exceedingly. 'I like my little stummy,' he had once frankly observed, on being rallied on his devotion to the delicacies of the table. His very temperance had been the result of calculation. 'No pudding, thank you: not when I have had roast duck. It takes the taste of the roast duck away.'

These simple pleasures no longer remained to him! he had left them for some time, for the allurements of fictitious literature. And now his very appetite had fled.

'You'll die if you don't eat, Frank. Remember the Rattle,' George had jestingly said to him; and he had burst out passionately with 'I wish I was dead,' to the horror of the domestic audience.

The mention of the Rattle was an allusion to a certain speech of Frank's, when quite a child, which, for simplicity and grim humour, is not to be surpassed by any childish utterance (though I keep an ample record of such things) that has ever come under my observation. He was overheard talking to another child upon that favourite juvenile topic, Death; and the other had observed how shocking it would be should such a catastrophe occur in a house—to papa and mamma, for instance. 'The worst thing about it must be, I should think, the death rattle.'

'Oh, I shouldn't mind *that* so much,' said Frankie, thinking of his beloved Babla; 'because it would amuse the baby.'

His other sayings were forgotten—effaced by the pregnant remarks of the later arrival ; but this one abode in the memory of his kinsfolk—as well it might.

While Lady Arden was yet puzzling herself as to what had 'come to' her boy ; and within an hour of the interview with him, above described, he came to express his contrition that he had troubled her in the matter at all. Upon second thoughts, he felt that home was home, and that it would be better for him that he should stay where he was, and learn German. He was glad that his mother had spoken of his becoming Miss Hurt's pupil ; for he was sure that he should get on with her : all this he stated in a curious out-and-dried manner, very different from his usual outpourings, and especially contrasting with his manner, which was nervous and anxious in a high degree. To crown all, he finished by bursting into a passion of tears, which, if he had been a girl, would have been pronounced hysterical. Then perceiving his mother's terrified looks, he suddenly seized her hand, and adjured her in the most moving tones not to reveal to any one what had passed between them. 'Not even to dear Papa—or, or—to Mr. Walcot.'

'Certainly not, my darling ; this is a matter for your own mother's care.'

And Lady Arden's placid, and to say truth somewhat vapid, face, grew steadfast enough. It boded danger to somebody ; and though she had not as yet fixed—for certain—where her wrath was due, she nursed it from that hour.

The truth was that between those two interviews betwixt mother and child, Uncle Ferdinand had found Master Frank in tears, and laid his velvet paw upon him.

'What now, my young friend ? Are you still thinking of the prison and the gallows ? Have you no confidence in my promise to do all I can to save you ?'

'Oh, yes, sir, it is not that ; but I am so miserable ; and oh, please, Mr. Walcot, I would much rather go to school, as you once wished me to do.'

'Ah ! you think you will be safe from the consequences of your crime at school. That is a great mistake. Neither time nor distance can save you from that ; it is only by great efforts that I have persuaded old Groat to be quiet for the present—'



Then, with sudden sharpness, 'You have not been mad enough to tell any one, surely!'

'Oh, no, not about *that*, Mr. Walcot,' answered the boy, with a shudder. 'I only told Mamma that I should like to go to school—which I thought would please you.'

Mr. Walcot smiled grimly; he saw that his tyranny was already bearing the usual fruit of lies.

'That was very right of you, young gentleman; you are quite right to always please me. Only, as it happens, I do not now wish you to go to school. You will remain here and study German with Miss Hurt; and you will learn to speak it, or at least to understand it when it is spoken, pretty quickly. Give your mind to that, do you?'

He foresaw that the boy might be useful to him as a spy on Gresham and the governess.

'Yes, Mr. Walcot, I hear.' His tone was such, that if he had added, 'to hear is to obey,' after the Eastern fashion, the words could not have implied more of submission.

'That's well. Now go to your mother, and tell her—without breathing a word of my having spoken to you—that you are sorry you made a fool of yourself in asking to be sent to school. You can say it was only "temper," brought on—yes, that will be best—by a quarrel with Jem Groad. And tell her you like Miss Hurt—'

'I do,' interrupted the poor boy, anxious to conciliate his tormentor, and glad to be able to do so in one point, at least, with a clear conscience.

'I was sure you did, or I would not have told you to do so,' observed Uncle Ferdinand gravely. 'And liking her so much, it is only natural you should wish to be her pupil. When I hear that this is arranged I shall be pleased; but for the future, remember, I am your confidant, and no one else. You are to come to me in the first place, before consulting others. It is I alone who know what is best for you to do. If you had got your wish for going to school, for example, that might have precipitated matters with old Groad; he would probably have sent for the policeman at once.'

At this ghastly picture, all the details of which the poor boy's imagination at once supplied, Frankie trembled. His na-



tural intelligence, since it was of course utterly unsupplemented by any knowledge of the world, was a positive disadvantage to him; a phenomenon much less rare than is supposed. Walcot saw that it was absolutely necessary to reassure his young friend before he could perform his errand, and even as it was, as we have seen, he had inspired such abject fear, as aroused Lady Arden's suspicions. With all his sagacity Mr. Walcot did not perhaps quite understand a mother's feelings.

'Well, well, you needn't shake in your shoes, lad; in my hands you are safe enough, if only you are not so foolish as to try and slip out of them. You may always count on me as your friend, provided you deserve it. Now go to your mother and tell her what I have told you.'

Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, though deemed by some, who thought they knew him best, to be somewhat of an ascetic—too studious and spiritual-minded to concern himself much with material matters, save when duty prompted him to do so—had, in fact, his little enjoyments. He was—we will not say less divine—but certainly more human than people generally imagined. He had passions—and strong ones, too—like other folks; and one of them was a love of power; principally, it is true, for what it brought, but also for its own sake. It was strange that so astute a birdcatcher should have found satisfaction in having taken captive such a fledging as poor little Frankie Nicoll; and yet a decided look of triumph glowed in his dark eyes as they followed the child out of the room. He had thrown his net over many a bird in his time; birds of prey, which had cost him a sharp tussle; birds of plumage, that had taken all his art to make them his own. Yet few of these triumphs had given him such pleasure as the capture of this callow little one. He looked for the nonce less like the fowler than the fisherman, who, finding but a sprat in his net, exclaims contentedly, 'Little fish are sweet!' The reason of this was, that he wanted this sprat to catch a herring!

## CHAPTER XV.

## ON ONE SIDE OF THE DOUBLE DOORS.

THE general ease of movement in "the wheels of Being" at Halcombe Hall was (thanks to some one's careful oiling) perfect. Not only were all domestic matters managed smoothly but things without doors—the home farm and the horses, the land and the small tenantry—gave little or no trouble, a fact that would certainly have needed explanation had not the reason been acknowledged by all since the master was singularly deficient in the art of management, and shrank from business details of all sorts with morbid reluctance. A man who (according to his own account, though it was confided only to a single friend), "had more converse with the Dead than the Living," and thanked Heaven that it was so, could hardly be expected to interest himself in leases, the price of cattle, the rights of a Lord of the Manor as to "foreshore," and much less in still smaller sublunary things. To say that Ferdinand Walcott was Sir Robert Arden's *factotum* was to give but a feeble idea of his position as *alter ego*, substitute, and vicar extraordinary, and more than this, he was in some sort, "the keeper of his lord's conscience," not only in moral affairs but in things spiritual. He was no priest, it is true; he made no claim to the Apostolic character; but he had a habit, which would have been thought very reprehensible by ecclesiastics, of administering absolution.

Whenever Sir Robert acted harshly (or what seemed to be harshly in one of his mild disposition) and was troubled in his mind in consequence, Mr. Walcott was always at his elbow to whisper, 'You did right, Arden.' And it was certain that he ought to be a good judge of the matter, since in every case of the kind, it was he himself who had originally suggested the line of conduct in question. The only exception to this was when his friend would sometimes inquire, as if in soliloquy,

why he had contracted a second marriage,—how it was that, having been mated with an angel, he could ever have given way to human weakness to the extent of allying himself to a daughter of Earth, however eligible? Sir Robert's conscience, it will be seen, was quite exceptionally tender, for it was not as if he had taken advantage of his rank and wealth to link the charms of youth with his maturity. Mrs. Nicoll had been a widow—well favoured and ladylike, and well connected, no doubt—but still a widow, bordering on middle age, when he married her, and possessing four children—all charming in their way, but still what the cold world would describe as 'encumbrances.' Perhaps he desired what the medical fraternity describe as 'a thorough change.' If so, he had got it. No two ladies could well have differed more in appearance and disposition than the past and present Lady Arden. Of the latter we have given some outlines; a kindly hearted, but weak, woman; a valetudinarian, yet always well enough for a dinner party or a ball—in consenting to live in quiet, and almost seclusion, at Halcombe, she had indeed made a considerable sacrifice for her children's sake. And yet, with all this love of fashion, and with some experience, she was wanting in self-possession. There was a story extant of her having had to consult a physician who was a stranger to her, which was characteristic. It was before her wealthy days, and when it was necessary for her to attend personally to household matters, which were hateful to her; but she could always afford a guinea to a new physician. From extreme shyness, however, she chose to set down her symptoms in pen and ink, and placed the paper in the Doctor's hands, so as to avoid being questioned more than necessary *viva voce*.

The Doctor opened the paper and began to read aloud, 'Eight pairs of stockings, three chem—'

'Good Heavens,' she cried, 'it is my washing list.'

A little mistake that added an attack of hysterics to her long list of disorders. Such was but a slight sample of her weakness of character; but she was a worthy woman of beautiful cream colour, as we have already mentioned, and possessed a noble figure. But she was not, perhaps, the wife to suit a Visionary.

Madeline Walcot, on the other hand, had in appearance resembled a good fairy ; of Spanish complexion, delicate of frame, *spirituelle* of disposition, who repaid the devotion of her husband with a passion equal to his own. She was an orphan, and her only brother, Ferdinand, was living in Australia when Sir Robert wooed and won her. They had the same tastes for literature and poetry ; the same aspirations (not high but tender ones) for the happiness of their fellow-creatures, but, save for this, they lived for one another only. It was long before Sir Robert could bring himself to believe that this exquisite flower, which at once adorned and sweetened his existence, was lent to him but for a short time ; that notwithstanding his loving hold and careful tendance of it, it was doomed to fail and perish ; the fatal truth was hardly borne in upon him until he saw her dead before him—faded away to a mere shadow of her former self ; an exquisite skeleton flower, lovely to the last, but without bloom, or leaf, or fragrance. From that hour this world grew dark to him, and his happiest moments were those in which he flattered himself he caught certain vague and glimmering glimpses of the Other, concerning which he and his lost one had often speculated together, not, it must be confessed, in a very philosophic manner.

They had read together certain novel gospels (in which an ungrudging Faith is even more necessary than in the old one), wherein we are told that the spirits of the Dead can be called at pleasure—or at least under favourable conditions—to commune with those they have left behind them, though certainly in a somewhat unsatisfying and unsatisfactory manner. Of old she had been the Preacher, and he the somewhat hesitating Pupil, but now that she was gone, her teachings had become, as it were, no longer the speculations of an ardent nature that despised logic and cold formulas ; they were sacred truths to him. And everything that appertained to her received more or less of this consecration. In her lifetime, save the parting from himself at the end of it, his Madeline had but two sorrows ; one that she had given him no son to bear his name, and inherit the virtues she (not without reason) imputed to him, and the other, the absence of her brother.

‘ You will be kind to poor Ferdinand when he returns,

Robert,' she had said, again and again, though once would have been all sufficient. She did not go into details concerning him, though when he had offered—if money was the thing he needed—to bring her brother to her side from his distant home, she had declined its aid. He understood that he was of far too proud a nature to accept of such assistance, and so perhaps it was. 'Ferdinand will return to comfort you when I am gone,' she said, in her last moments. And her promise was fulfilled, but by no means immediately; nor did he give a hint of such an intention till two years after Madeline's death, and when Sir Robert (finding solitude perhaps intolerable) had married a second time.

Concerning this matter, as we have said, Ferdinand was silent, and in his heart Sir Robert knew that his brother-in-law disapproved of that act. It would have been a comfort to him, indeed, could he have got his assurance that it was the best thing to have done, as he did in all other cases; as it was, it seemed to him that, resenting this sad instance of disloyalty to the memory of his sister, he received with some coldness the relation of his spiritual experiences in connection with her. This was the more painful, as Mr. Ferdinand Walcot himself was one of those few privileged mortals who could hold communion with denizens of the other world, almost at will. At all events, he had had such 'manifestations' (as they were technically called) as threw the poor favours granted to Sir Robert quite into the shade. He was not only endowed with certain mesmeric powers, his possession of which had been placed beyond question, by experiments performed, half in seriousness, half in joke, upon members of the family at the Hall, and others,—but—though this was a faith he had only admitted in confidence to Sir Robert—he was a 'Medium.' His modesty in allusion to this faculty, and even a certain way he had of deprecating it, by no means made him appear less gifted in Sir Robert's estimation; so far from sharing that gentleman's distrust in his own powers, his allusions to them were so worded as to cause the baronet to credit him with a certain apprehension of their magnitude; he looked upon him as a chosen instrument for good in hands that were far stronger than of humanity, and which moulded him, independent of his

own will. It was this spiritual gift—joined with his relationship to his own sainted Madeline—that formed the ‘sacred tie’ of which Sir Robert was wont to speak as binding Him to Ferdinand Walcot.

On the day on which Mr. Frederick Mayne was expected at Halcombe, Sir Robert did not appear at breakfast. He had passed an unusually bad night, even for him—an habitually bad sleeper—and he took his morning meal apart in his study. The home party were all sincerely grieved, for there was not a member of it who did not entertain a sincere affection for him; but for one or two of them their regret for his absence, if not its cause, had considerable mitigation in the fact that it deprived them of the presence of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot. The Master of Halcombe and his brother-in-law were always what is vulgarly termed inseparable, but when the former was out of sorts in any way, the latter stuck to him like his shadow. He had read prayers at Sir Robert’s request—in the baronet’s eyes none were so fit for High Priest of any Household—but on conclusion of that ceremony he had at once withdrawn himself through the double doors to join his friend. And the breakfast was not a less cheerful meal to the rest in consequence.

I am afraid this happens from the withdrawal of any especially wise and good personage from most companies. It is felt that in his presence ordinary observations are too frivolous; when we speak to him it is like dropping words into an ear-trumpet, something of unusual weight and value seems to be expected, and any trifles addressed to others are uttered in a low tone lest they should offend his venerable ear.

To hear the animated cackle that broke out upon all sides that morning when he left the room was to be reminded of the birth of day,—the chief topic being naturally the new arrival for whom the ‘break’ was to be sent that morning to Archester. It was a vehicle that had taken one ‘side’ of a cricket match in its time, beside lookers-on, and was of a capacity practically without limit. The only question was who chose to go. ‘Milly will of course make one,’ observed Gresham, gravely.

‘Why so?’ inquired Lady Arden, whose good-nature always caused her to take jokes in good part, but whose intelligence



was of that exacting character that requires to have jokes explained to it; and even to be informed when a joke is intended.

'You may well ask, Mamma,' said Milly, tossing her pretty head. 'I am sure I don't know why I should go to see Mr. Mayne more than anybody else.'

'I have been indiscreet,' said Gresham, with a look round the table that drew a smile even from the unhappy Frank.

'You have been very impertinent, sir,' retorted Milly; 'and if I took the same miserable pleasure in poking stupid jokes at people, as you do, I could make you in your turn very uncomfortable.'

All the indignation of sixteen was flushing poor Milly's cheeks.

For the moment Gresham flushed too. Was it possible that she suspected something of his attachment to Elise, and was thus alluding to it? Conscience makes cowards of us all. Her next words, however, relieved his fears.

'I think it very ungrateful of you,' she continued, 'after my being the cause of Mr. Mayne's——' Here she stopped, alarmed at her own indiscretion; she had not intended to have made any allusion to Gresham's sending the telegram; but her wrath had blinded her.

'The cause of Mr. Mayne's what?' inquired Evelyn, merrily.

'His coming,' exclaimed Gresham, gravely.

'Well, yes, his coming, you know all about that,' exclaimed Milly, with desperation.

'I don't know, I only guess,' answered that young gentleman. 'The fact is I was so foolish as to show Milly his photograph.'

'You did not,' shrieked injured innocence.

'No; I am wrong. She found it for herself in my—— Where she found it Mr. Gresham was not permitted to explain, for Milly had risen from her chair, intent on vengeance, and he fled before her round the table till called to order by Lady Arden's voice.

'What a child you are, George! You will make Milly more of a hoyden than she is by nature.'



It was, perhaps, a somewhat indecorous scene judged by the cold conventions of the breakfast table ; yet to see this handsome young fellow, with his feigned face of fear, pursued by a Grace in guise of a Fury, disturbed Evelyn's gentle gravity, lit up Elise's Teuton face with mirth, made even Frankie forget for a moment the Damocles sword suspended over him, and so delighted the Great Babla (who always took his morning meal in public like some early King) that he rapped upon the table with his egg-spoon, crying, 'More, more,' his method of demanding an encore of anything that pleased him, from a thunder clap to currant jelly.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## {ON THE OTHER SIDE.

ON the other side of the double doors a very different breakfast scene was being enacted. Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was what 'liberal shepherds' would term a 'heavy feeder,' though this was understood by his intimates to arise not from gross appetite but from the necessity all nervously organised temperaments are under to be well nourished. He could tackle kidneys, and even mutton chops at the morning meal; he took as many eggs as go to make an ordinary omelette; and was partial to honey in his tea. Sir Robert watched the performance of these feats with languid admiration; he guessed what the wear and tear of his friend's constitution must be, under its peculiar spiritual conditions, and bowed to circumstances; he sipped his coffee, and waited until the oracle should be in a fit state for consultation.

'Now tell me all about it, Arden,' said his companion, when he had arrived at the last stage of his repast, and was toying with his toast and marmalade. 'There was no visible manifestation, surely!'

'No, thank Heaven; not, indeed that I ought to shrink even from that; my Madeline, it is certain, would never harm me.'

'Of course not. She must needs mean well, whatever causes her to seek your presence—if she does seek it.'

'Ferdinand, how can you doubt it?' exclaimed Sir Robert, reproachfully. 'You of all men!'

'I do not doubt, Arden; but I keep my mind open; I will not deliver it over, tied and bound, to any power whether in this world or the other. I am not fully persuaded even of certain things that have happened to myself. Perhaps I am by nature sceptical.'

'You must be so, indeed, to doubt what you yourself have witnessed.'

A look of annoyance crossed Mr. Walcot's features. 'I sometimes repent, Arden, of having made you my confidant. You make too much of these experiences. The judicial faculty is the one most essential in such matters ; without that a man may become the blindest instrument of unknown powers. Now tell me about yourself. When did this manifestation happen to you, or seem to happen ?'

'Last night, at about the midnight hour. I was sitting here alone, with my mind engaged with material matters——'

'What matters ?' put in the other quietly. 'It is necessary to understand exactly in what grooves your thoughts were moving.'

'I was making my will.'

Walcot bowed his head ; his face was impassive as marble ; but if the Great Babla had been under the table (a favourite haunt and fastness of his) his quick eyes would have noticed 'Uncle Ferdy's' hand clutch the arm of his chair. 'That is an occupation' he observed 'which leads men to think of Death—the Future.'

'I was thinking of nothing of the kind, Walcot ; my mind was fixed on business matters—on the claims of duty—and of friendship,' he added with significance.

Mr. Walcot smiled and sighed.

He did not pretend to be ignorant of his friend's kind intentions ; they were gratifying to his feelings ; but he had long entertained the conviction—and had expressed it to his companion—that he should meet with an early death. Those whom the gods love—and especially those on whom they confer such unwonted privileges—die young.

'I was thinking of stock and share, of land and tenements,' continued Sir Robert, gravely, 'when I suddenly became aware of my lost Madeline's presence.'

'Her presence ?'

'Yes ; not in the room, indeed, but close at hand. Did I not tell you that, when I was in my old study at the Grange, and did not wish to be disturbed, a signal was agreed upon between my dear wife and me ? She would knock three times with the flat of her hand upon the door, to let me know that she, and she only, wished to see me.'

'No, you never told me. Well ?'

'This peculiar signal was given to me upon yonder window.'

'The ear, as I have said, is easily deceived,' observed Walcott. 'The wind——'

'The night was still as death,' interposed Sir Robert, solemnly; 'and all the household had retired. I am quite sure I was not deceived.'

'Well, you opened the shutters, of course?'

'I? No, I dared not, without some invitation more direct. I threw down my pen and listened attentively. Then I heard a voice that I loved singing a song that I knew. Hush! (for Mr. Walcott had been about to interrupt) let me tell you how it was from first to last. Years ago, ere dearest Madeline betrayed any signs of that disease which snatched her from me, and when, I, alas, was young, I was a poet. You smile. Let me say that I thought myself one. I made verses, at all events, and some of them had sufficient merit to induce my darling to set them to music. I could not rhyme now, even though the guerdon promised were to see her sweet face once more; but in those days so it was. The poem that was the chief favourite with us both was one upon the various callings of mankind; the husbandman, the merchant, the soldier, and so forth. I am afraid I weary you, but this explanation is necessary.'

'Not at all,' answered his companion, softly; 'I am more interested than I dare to confess. You wrote a poem on the callings of mankind; Horace wrote a sketch of them, likewise'

'I remember; but in this I described the thoughts of a young man, when various roads in life are presented to his view for his choice. He recites one after the other:

*This yeoman's life is but a sleep*

(He says)

*And mine shall not be,  
I would up through the dark and leap,  
Not crawl where I could see.*

And again,

*This merchant's brows are lined*

He says,

*As his ledgers be,  
And he shudders more with every wind  
Than his tall ships at sea.*

At last he chooses the military calling.

Swift handed, firm-eyed, underneath  
Brows which black Care doth flee,  
In life well, but best in the Death,  
The soldier (he says) for me.

And this is the description of "The Soldier," which many a time I have heard my darling sing :

Merrily clash the cymbals twain,  
With an exultant note,  
Stirring sounds doth the trumpet rain  
Adown its brazen throat ;

Freshly fleeth the pennant fair  
From the good lance's head ;  
The stirrup's clank is blythe to hear,  
Blythe is the charger's tread.

Fierce and clear is the scabbard's ring,  
With the sharp sword for guest ;  
But the whirl of the downward swing  
Of that blue blade is best.

And the tramp of a thousand steeds  
In thunder and cloud,  
When the earth is shaken and bleeds,  
Maketh a man's heart proud.

More proud than mere words ever said  
Or songs ever sung !  
And proudest the hearts fever-fed  
Of the brave and the young.'

'That is noble verse,' observed Mr. Walcot, approvingly ;  
'I had no idea that you had such poetry in you—the true ring.'

Sir Robert sat with his eyes fixed thoughtfully before him, as though he were listening to such tones as the poet tells us are sweeter than 'heard melodies.'

The bard must be rapt, indeed, who takes no notice of a compliment to his own muse.

'Well, you heard a voice, which seemed like Madeline's voice,' continued Walcot, in an earnest but philosophic tone, such as befits some disinterested judicial functionary engaged in the dissection of evidence—'and it sang this ballad ?'

'It was Madeline's voice ; I say not "seems,"' answered Sir Robert, emphatically.

'Voices can imitate voices, my good friend ; there is a door in yonder wall, which communicates with the outside world.'

'Tush, Ferdinand, you are wasting time. Does not even the bird know the song of her mate? But apart from that there were the *words*: *my* words. She was wont to sing them to me alone. No living eye has ever seen them, save my own, no living ear has ever heard them. You yourself even, for example, were ignorant that I had ever written a line of poetry. Is it not so?'

Mr. Walcot bowed his head.

'There is a homely proverb, Arden, which you will pardon me for quoting; the importance of these things is so tremendous. "As the fool thinks so the bell tinks." In other words the imagination will sometimes mislead the more material senses. Do you not think that you may have supplied the sense to this singer's song?'

'No; every word of the ballad was as distinct and clear as I have given it.'

'And is there no copy of this ballad in your possession, which by any accident—or otherwise—may have fallen into other hands.'

Sir Robert hesitated. 'There was one once; but it never left my desk, and has long since been destroyed. It is not humanly possible that it could have been made use of as you suggest.'

Mr. Walcot rose from his seat and began to pace the room. His broad brow was furrowed with thought. 'Not humanly possible,' he repeated. 'It is most true that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. Arden, I dare not take it upon myself to advise you in this matter; scarcely even to give you comfort.'

The speaker's voice was tremulous; his face was pale and grave; if he had been a less logical and sagacious character one would almost have said, as one listened and looked at him. 'That man is awe-stricken.'

'Good heavens! what do you mean?' inquired the other; he, too, rose from his seat, and made as if he would have joined his friend, but his limbs refused their office. He sat down again, pale and trembling; then, in a tone of piteous entreaty, he cried, 'you will not desert me, Ferdinand?'

'Desert you, my friend? Never. No power whether in this world or the next can compel me to do that.'

He drew near and held out his hand, which Sir Robert seized with eagerness and clung to, as a drowning man clutches and clings to a floating spar.

'I am yours, Arden, under all circumstances; but I am compelled to tell you that our relations have in one respect undergone a change. Hitherto it has been your custom to regard me with reference to certain matters, as an exceptionally favoured (though, alas, undeserving) being.'

'Not undeserving, do not say that, Ferdinand,' interposed the other, deeply moved.

'No, matter; that may be so or not; these gifts fall like the sunshine and the rain upon good and bad alike—though, it is true, I have witnessed things which I hardly think could have been vouchsafed to any one intrinsically wicked; but what are these, as compared with such an experience as you have just described to me? Robert Arden, you have become a link between earth and heaven. I have long suspected it; I have long seen you unconsciously fitting yourself—by purity, by unselfishness, by guileless trust and confidence—for that high but inscrutable office; and you have now, as I believe, attained it. You will bear me witness how I have struggled against this conviction; how I have disputed every inch of ground with you—affecting even an impious scepticism rather than encourage you to hope, where hope might have borne no fruit. But I contend no more against the will of Fate. You are henceforth my master.'

'Nay, Ferdinand; say not so. I am weak and fearful, while you are strong and firm. It is to you that I must ever look for counsel.'

'No, not to me, but higher. There are others who have now taken it in hand to guide you—to direct your every action.'

'But they have said nothing. I only feel that they are about me; that I am in their presence, though I see them not.'

'Even that may come,' answered Walcot, solemnly.

'Do you think then that I shall see her?'

'I do.'



There was a long pause. Sir Robert was greatly agitated. 'I feel myself unworthy of this function, Ferdinand, if, indeed, I am called to use it. Fondly as I love that dear departed spirit, I fear—judging from my feelings of yesternight, produced by the more tones of her voice—that I should be like one blinded with excess of light.'

'Tush! no greatness of this kind is thrust upon us mortals more than we can bear. Besides, your mission is only to hear and to obey. As you value your spiritual existence fail not in that obedience.'

'I will not fail, Ferdinand, at least in will; but I am distrustful of my own powers.'

'That is the very condition which is most welcome to our spiritual visitants,' answered the other, promptly. 'They never impose upon us a task too heavy for our hands. It is often, indeed, judged by the common standard, a simple and material act; scarcely ever of a nature such as we have preconceived.'

'Her wishes shall be fulfilled, Ferdinand, whatever they may be,' answered Arden, solemnly.

It was curious that while the one dealt in generalities, and spoke of 'they' or 'it' the other seemed to have but one thought; all his spiritual ideas were in connection with his Madeline.

'Now, Arden, you must smooth that brow of care,' said Walcot, earnestly; 'remember that no living being about us has any sympathy with the matters about which we have been discoursing; to drop a hint of them would only arouse contempt and ridicule.'

'Ridicule of my love for Madeline! They *dare* not!' exclaimed Sir Robert, passionately.

'You misunderstand me,' answered the other, quietly; 'they respect your sorrows and your loss, no doubt. But to their gross faculties the dead are dead. We are told not to give such persons occasion to blaspheme. There are young and thoughtless folks in the house, and there is a stranger coming, one of Gresham's friends, and probably of a like frivolous character.'

'I remember, and I regret it. I would have wished just now to be quite alone save for you, Ferdinand; to be removed from external influences as much as possible.'

'Doubtless it would have been better so ; but as it is, you must strive to forget what happened last night—what may happen this night. We are not put in the world to mope and dream like visionaries. There is a time for all things.'

'You are right, as you always are, Ferdinand. I will play the host, I will act the man. I will not give way to depression. Help me to put my coat on ;—let us go out into the morning air.'

## CHAPTER XVII.

## FERDINAND WALCOT'S FIRST WOOING.

THE poet who tells us that Black Care sits behind the Horseman tells only a half-truth. Commentators have strangely missed this point; some have conjectured that the Poet was not a good equestrian, and was always alarmed when 'outside' his beast; and perhaps the 'common sense of most' has rejected this theory too contemptuously: Englishmen do not take into account that the Latins were bad riders. Others again have aptly pointed out that the image of the Poet is meant to typify persons of exalted position in life, who have nevertheless their own little troubles; others have contended that it suggests, however fast we travel, we cannot escape our regrets. None, however, have chanced to hit the blot in the Poet's statement; we have called it, out of delicacy, and reverence for the classics, a half-truth; but the fact is that Black Care does not generally sit behind the Horseman, but locates itself *before* him—on the pommel. It is the Future, and not the Past, concerning which mortals, for the most part, have their apprehensions, though it is true, on the other hand, that some people have reason to be afraid of both.

Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, as we have seen, was seated pretty firmly on his steed; a high horse, too, and a good stepper. Still he was not exempt from the common lot. He had certain burthens on his mind. The road of life was broad before him (it had begun narrowly), and there seemed few impediments, but it was necessary for him to keep a sharp look-out.

It was his habit to make a daily tour of inspection of the grounds about the Hall, and of the Farm, lest there should be anything amiss; and if there was so, it was seldom that his quick eye failed to discover it. The heads of departments made their several reports to him, as though he were their master, indeed with much greater particularity and adherence to truth

than they would have done in the case of Sir Robert himself. The deputy has generally this immense advantage, that he cannot be appealed to on his sentimental side ; his answer is ready, ' I have only to act in my employer's interest ; ' but Mr. Walcot had no necessity to shelter himself under this plea. No one dreamt of softening him—of getting him to forgive a lapse of duty—by an appeal *ad misericordiam*. They knew him too well, though some knew that there were other ways of getting their offences pardoned, no, not pardoned, kept out of sight and secured from exposure—for the present. This class made reports to him of a somewhat different character from the others ; they were of a more private nature, and to say truth had something of ' secret service ' belonging to them.

On the day of the interview which we have described between Sir Robert and Mr. Walcot, Gilbert Holm had a word to say to the latter, not strictly in connection with live or dead stock, which was not, however, volunteered. The young farmer had strayed, as we know, from the path of honesty ; but the offence in which he had been detected (some people have *such* ill-luck) has been his first one ; in spite of that deficit in the hay-rick, and the commission in cows (which was, after all, a colourable transaction), he was not a rogue in grain, but only a man without firmness and principle. He had slipped, like many a weak fool before him, upon ' the Turf,' where in trying to make a fortune he had lost a competence ; but he was neither a sneak nor a villain. There were some persons under Mr. Walcot's protection (*i. e.*, thumb) who were always eager to curry favour with him by telling stories against their neighbours, but Holm was not of this class. He did not pretend to look pleased when his Master and Tyrant looked in at the Farm that morning, and observed that there was a smell of spirits in the parlour.

' You have been drinking again, Gilbert—don't deny it.'

' I wasn't going to deny it, sir,' answered the other, gloomily, ' but when a man's down on his luck, and has been harshly treated——'

' Harshly treated ? ' interrupted Walcot. ' What do you mean ? Why you might have flung in a——'

'Hush, sir, for heaven's sake ; there's folk in the kitchen,' cried Holm, appealingly. 'When I say harsh, I mean it's hard to feel that one's very soul is not one's own, because one has tripped just once.'

'It was unfortunate, certainly, to be found out in one's first fault,' observed the other, contemptuously.

It was a weakness in Walcot, not only to despise his instruments but to let them see that he despised them ; perhaps it was done in compensation for the somewhat sycophantic part he had to play with Sir Robert.

'How are things going at the farm ? Have you anything to tell me ?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'You lie. Something has gone wrong, I am certain. Gilbert Holm, if you ever dare to deceive me, I'll——' He lifted his heel, and set it down on the floor significantly.

'There is nothing wrong at the Farm,' answered the other, doggedly, 'nor wrong at all as I know of. But you told me to tell you everything that took place out of the common, and it *was* out of the common for Lady Arden to come down here yesterday to visit Mr. Dyneley.'

'So it was, Holm ; you are quite right to mention it,' answered Mr. Walcot, gently. 'So her ladyship came to call on the Curate, did she ? Well, as you say, there was nothing wrong, let us hope, in that. Was she long here ?'

'A matter of more than an hour.'

'And what did they talk about ? I mean so far as you can guess, of course.'

'Well, I did hear, as she went out, a word dropped about Master Frank. I think she came to consult Mr. Dyneley about his going to school, and that. There is no doubt he goes about half broken-hearted, and very different from what he used to be, cause o' Jem Groad.'

Mr. Walcot did not seem to hear the latter observation. 'Mr. Dyneley had better mind his own business,' observed he, meaningly.

'Very good, sir ; shall I tell him that ?'

'Tell him what ? You fool, that was neither for his ears nor

yours. Watch him—dog him—glean all you can hear about him in the parish. Do you hear?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then also heed.’

With a muttered curse, Ferdinand Walcot turned upon his heel, and strode away.

‘So the maternal suspicions are aroused, and she is going elsewhere for counsel,’ he murmured to himself; ‘I must look to this. That Holm is not to be trusted. Young Gresham dares to flout me—though his pride will have a speedy fall. The girl Hurt was a godsend to me, but she knows it, and is therefore dangerous. I must make a clean sweep. The question is—Shall it be before or after I have carried off the King? I think I am sure of him. I have flattered him to the top of his bent, and there needs but one bold stroke. It must be struck soon, I feel. Rebellion lifts its head. Why did not the waves finish their work with Gresham and the girl? My good star deserted me there: “the spirits”—here he laughed aloud—“forgot to aid me. And yet that would have brought me no nearer to my haven. It is Dyneley, the meek-faced curate who stands in my path, not Gresham. What blind moles men are, ay, and women too, whom fools compare with lynxes. Lady Arden seeks advice of him. “A matter of more than an hour” were the sot’s words; they must have talked of other things beside Frank. I thought I saw coldness in her manner this morning. She shall pay for that. So shall they all—save one. Ah, Evelyn?’

As he stepped from the shrubbery that hid the farm buildings on to the lawn he had come suddenly upon her, booted and furred, in a scarlet mantle, and with a basket in her hand, bound probably on some charitable errand to the village.

‘How you frightened me, Mr. Walcot!’ exclaimed she, with a touch of irritation.

‘I crave your pardon, though you startled *me* in your turn; I thought you were Red Riding Hood.’

‘Well, fancy her feelings when she met the wolf,’ said Evelyn, laughing; ‘then you will pity mine.’

‘I don’t remember that she had any repugnance to the wolf, Miss Evy, when she met him.’

‘True; but she had afterwards, when she found him out.’

‘Found him out?’

The colour rushed to Walcot's face as he echoed those words ; it seemed to him for the moment that this young girl must have been listening to his late soliloquy in the shrubbery ; though even in that there had been no menace to herself.

The simple fact was that Evelyn, like any other young person of her sex, had, wishing to punish, used the first cutting words that came to hand. A glance at her face re-assured him.

'I hope the more you "find out," as you term it, of me, Evelyn,' said he gravely, 'the less you would have cause to feel repugnance.'

'Of course I was only joking, Mr. Walcot.'

'I hope so ; but sometimes you act towards me with such cruelty that the words you have just employed seem hardly out of place.'

'Cruelty ?' she stopped amazed, and stared at him. He moved, however, slowly on, and it was significant of the authority he exercised over her—even when she would have resented it—that she moved with him.

'Of course you did not mean to be cruel, Evelyn.

You, whose sweet blue eyes  
Grow tender over drowning flies,

would willingly hurt no one's feelings. Yet you hurt mine sometimes.'

Evelyn was silent ; she felt very uncomfortable. She would have given much to be relieved from this *tête-à-tête*, the end of which, she had a presentiment, had by no means arrived. But all the family, except Sir Robert, were from home. Lady Arden herself had taken a seat in the break, thinking that her neuralgia—for that was her leading disorder for the present—would be benefited by a drive over the moor. Even the Great Babla was at that moment graciously expressing his approbation of the works of Nature, as viewed from that vehicle. Evelyn, too, would have gone, but for a promise she had given to read to a sick girl in the village.

'I cannot think how I could have hurt your feelings, Mr. Walcot,' she answered vaguely.

'I dare say not ; but with me it is very different. I am



always thinking of yours ; and when there is any slight put upon you, I am filled with indignation.'

'I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Walcot ; but I am not aware that anybody does put slights upon me.'

'Then you must be blind, indeed.'

She stopped again ; and this time he stopped too. They were half-way down the avenue, beyond which he did not wish their walk together to extend, and he had not yet had his say.

'Blind, Mr. Walcot ? What do you mean ?'

'I mean that the man to whom you are—or at least to whom common report, and the fixed intentions of your step-father has assigned you—is carrying on a flirtation with your governess under your own roof ; I could almost say under your own eyes.'

Evelyn turned scarlet : silent for a moment, she presently broke forth with 'You talk of slights, Mr. Walcot ; but this is an impertinence !'

'Nay, pardon me. It is most pertinent both to your own interests and those of all concerned. Am I to understand that you do not credit what I say, or that you are already aware of Mr. Gresham's faithlessness and have forgiven it ?'

'I am aware that he loves Miss Hurt, sir.'

'I concluded as much,' answered Walcot gravely ; 'and however much his own conduct is to be deprecated, I am rejoiced to find that it has not cost you a pang. Sir Robert, however, I need not say, takes a very different view of the matter.'

'Does Papa know of it then ?' inquired Evelyn anxiously ; her solicitude upon Gresham's account throwing her for the moment off her guard.

'He suspects there is something wrong, and resents—exceedingly resents—the duplicity his nephew has practised. He has more than once consulted me on the matter, Evelyn ; and really I scarce know how to advise him. I must confess that indignation on your account has prompted me to acquiesce in the severest measures ; but if the young man's conduct has not displeased you, and if you wish him to be dealt with less in justice than in mercy, so far as my influence goes you may of course command it. Otherwise—so great is Sir Robert's dis-

pleasure—that it probable that a branch will be lopped off the family tree.’

‘What *do* you mean?’ inquired Evelyn, greatly moved. ‘That George will be disinherited?’

Mr. Walcot shrugged his shoulders. ‘I only know that Sir Robert was making his will last night; with the contents of it I am, of course, unacquainted; but it was the disturbance of his mind in consequence of it that has made him ill.’

‘Oh, Mr. Walcot, I know you do not like him; but I entreat you—I implore you—to spare poor George.’

‘To spare him, Evelyn? You speak as if I had been adding fuel to his uncle’s indignation. As to liking him—how could I do otherwise than despise the man—who having (as I thought) the greatest blessing which earth could grant within his reach, could contemptuously spurn it. I was wrong, it seems, in this particular: you never loved him and he knew it.’

‘I have loved him as a brother; but as a brother only.’

‘Just so; and as his sister, you would wish to shield him from the consequences of his own duplicity. For your sake I will do my best for him. If he were the greatest scoundrel on earth, Evelyn; and though duty, honour, conscience, all combined within me to demand his punishment, I should do my best for him—for your sake.’

‘You are very good, Mr. Walcot; but——’

She hesitated; she felt somehow that she was laying herself under an obligation, not indeed unjustifiable, but which might demand some reciprocity that it was out of her power to grant.

‘No, I am not good, Evelyn,’ answered her companion, gravely; ‘or at least not half good enough for the object I have in view.’

And he looked at her with tenderness—a genuine tenderness—that froze the blood in her veins. She felt unequal to reply to him, and yet of what a monstrous nature seemed the consent for which her silence might be taken!

‘Your words to me this day, dear Evelyn,’ he went on, ‘have taken from my heart a load, the existence of which you little guess; of which I have not dared hitherto to breathe a syllable; but now the time is come! You have just confessed to me that the obstacle to my happiness, which I deemed insu-

perable, has no existence ; that, in a word, you are heart whole. It is so, is it not ?

'I—you—Mr. Walcot ! You have no right to catechise me thus,' she stammered.

'Nay, every man has the right to ask the question upon which hinges his hopes of happiness. You may say it is mere audacity in my case : I admit it. " Love turns even the coward's heart to steel ;" and I am no coward. If your affections are elsewhere engaged—as I once believed them to be—that is another matter ; if they are not ? I understand you to say that at least you have formed no other engagement ? Good. Then I have the right to say " I love you, Evelyn. "'

'You have no right whatever so to do,' answered Evelyn, haughtily. ' I am sure that if Papa was aware of your having done so, he would be very angry.'

'No doubt he would, because he believes you to be engaged to his nephew. He feels, as I did, indignant with him, mainly upon your account, though also vexed—and justly so—with the disregard that has been paid to his own wishes. If, however, you wish me to disclose to him the real state of the case, I will do so ; and in that case I should not despair of gaining his consent to say to you what I have just ventured to say.'

'You might say it a thousand times, Mr. Walcot,' answered Evelyn, firmly ; ' I should only have one answer to give you—in the negative.'

'Yow think so now, and very naturally. I am not a young man, it is true, nor formed, perhaps, by Nature to please a young girl's eye ; but when you come to know me better as a free man—I mean as one who finds himself for the first time at liberty to manifest his heart's devotion—you will think better of me. Again, I am a poor man ; to you I doubtless seem but a poor dependent upon the bounty of your stepfather. But this is not quite so. I would never ask you to link yourself to poverty, for that, in your case—with your tastes and habits, and organization so rare and delicate—would be an ill-assorted match indeed. I have talents, of which I will not boast ; let it suffice to say that they will procure me, whenever I choose to exert them, much more than a competence. When I next venture to appeal to you, Evelyn, it will be as a rich man, and with your stepfather's full consent.'

'You may save yourself that trouble, Mr. Walcot,' she answered, coldly. 'Riches will never win a true woman's heart, believe me.'

'That is true, but they will smooth the way to win it. Take your own mother's case: can any one be a happier wife than she is? more loved, more respected; and yet it would be mere affectation to deny that Sir Robert's wealth smoothed his way to her.'

'This is ungenerous—ungentlemanly.'

'It is the plain truth, Evelyn, and you know it. Of course there are certain sympathetic elements wanting which renders the union less perfect than it might be; I flatter myself that it would not be so in our case. I have studied your character for years; it is infinitely superior to my own, but I shall grow to it. My faults are many, but I shall redeem them. You look incredulous; but strength of will is one of my few virtues.'

'I do not doubt that,' Evelyn flashed out with a significance that was almost fierce in its intensity.

'And you are right,' he answered, calmly. 'When I have set my heart upon a thing, it is always accomplished; some things are more difficult than others, but it is only a question of time.'

Evelyn shuddered. A momentary smile crossed Mr. Walcot's lips; it seemed to the fowler that the struggling bird already felt itself enmeshed.

'Your confidence in your own powers is for once misplaced, Mr. Walcot,' answered the girl, in trembling tones. 'I can never love you, as you wish, and I only fear you upon another's account, not on my own.'

'I should hope not, Evelyn. I wish you not to fear, but to pity me. I will not importune you further; much less will I take your thoughtless "No" as the result of mature reflection. I should continue to love you more than all the world beside as long as I lived, even if my devotion bore no fruit; but it will bear fruit. You will be mine some day, and will never regret, I may not say "your choice"—then I will say "Your Fate."'

Evelyn stood like one turned to stone; the quiet firmness of the man's words, delivered not only with the consciousness of

strength, but the full force of conviction, appalled her. He seemed less like an unwelcome lover making his appeal than a soothsayer foretelling her doom.

'For the present, Evelyn,' he added, 'I will say no more. We shall, I conclude, each keep our own counsel; you for another's sake (not mine, I know), and I for yours. May all good angels guide and guard you.'

A groom was coming through the gates whose approach he had doubtless observed, and calculated to a nicety; at all events, there was no time for his companion to reply to him. He lifted his hat, and moved slowly towards the Hall, while she went on her way half-dazed and stunned. She was conscious that she had been far from ready in her reply to him; though she had certainly given him not the slightest ground for his monstrous confidence. But their contest had not been on equal terms; she had been, as Mr. Gilbert Holm would have technically expressed it, 'heavily handicapped' on account of certain previous performances; especially her supposed engagement to Gresham. If she had set Walcot at defiance, as her feelings had prompted her to do, it was plain that she would have ruined George. The unexpectedness of Walcot's appeal had also prevented her from exercising her judgment; but she now remembered many little circumstances—mostly mere peculiarities in his tone and manner of late—which had now their full significance, and might have put her on her guard. But what alarmed her most was the openness of Walcot's avowal, upon which she felt quite sure he would never have ventured had he not secured himself from all danger from without. It was terrible to be silent on such a matter, because, though the man knew the necessity for her silence, it seemed to be almost affording encouragement to him. She had said that she did not fear him on her own account; but this was scarcely true; for she felt an absolute terror of his power and persistency. Yet, whatever his confidence in the result, hers was still more fixed. If there had not been another man in the world save Ferdinand Walcot, she would rather have died than marry him—and there *was* another man.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## THE NEW ARRIVAL.

LIFE, even in this world, has its compensations ; if a dull man bores and bores his company like the *Teredo navalis* till all hands are ready to sink, a bright and genial fellow will irradiate it ; if the one is as a dead fly in the ointment of the apothecary, the other is like the quince in the apple-pie ; its savour and fragrance permeate the whole dish, and rescue it from vapidty. Of the inmates of Halcombe Hall, as we have seen, there were several who were just now not having a very cheerful time of it. Evelyn, at once menaced and importuned, was compelled to nurse the wrath which certainly did not require to be 'kept warm.' George Gresham felt his footing dangerous, and that unfathomable gulfs were being dug for him by the hand of his enemy. And to poor little Frankie the figure of pitiless John Groad always presented itself pointing to the gallows tree. These were not festive social elements, and if a Bore had been introduced into the house upon the top of it all, existence at Halcombe would have been well nigh intolerable. Fortunately the new arrival, Mr. Frederick Mayne, was of quite a different species from the *Teredo* ; instead of sinking ships he buoyed them. Even vessels of heavy burthen—conversationally speaking, mere colliers—would become almost volatile when he attached himself to their side ; his spirits were such that they could have raised wrecks. The mariner's calling has a tendency to make men dull, but though Mayne loved the sea, and almost lived upon it, it had not depressed him ; if it had not been for his marine tastes, his companionship, perhaps, would have been too much of a good thing ; like that gay and thoughtless gentleman who had to be sandwiched between two clergymen before he was fit for general society.

His life had been remarkable : a cadet of an ancient and wealthy race, he had never envied his elder brother the fortune



that was in store for him, nor indeed wasted a thought about it; and cutting short a scholarless but not unexciting school time, had entered the navy under respectable auspices; his friends had consented to it, in preference to the only alternative he had proposed to himself, which was that of running away to sea. The inconveniences, not to say hardships, of this mode of life had not dismayed him as they dismay so many lads with similar aspirations, because all its disagreeables were mitigated by his overpowering sense of humour. Nevertheless this faculty was the cause of his abandoning a career in which, if opportunity had been granted him, he would perhaps have been another Dundonald, if not a Nelson.

His captain was stingy and punctilious; and as the senior officer on his station these qualities became notorious. He was studiously careful not to be entrapped into hospitalities. On one occasion the 'young gentlemen' were ordered for 'signal practice,' which, as every one knows, consists in combinations of flags. The first combination which occurred to Mr. Frederic Mayne was this:—'Captain Blank invites all the Captains on the station to dinner.'

There were seven of them, and they came in full regimentals, each in his gig, at six o'clock, to find Captain Blank just sitting down to a small piece of pickled pork. Their host, who had no sense of humour, had a keen perception of ridicule, and he made things so unpleasant for Mr. Mayne that he eventually had to leave the ship. His elder brother, however, had the good feeling to decessate at this critical epoch, and the midshipman became his own master, and the master of an immense income. Yielding for once to the advice of friends, he hereupon went to the University, where he fell in with George Gresham, and on obtaining his degree returned to his first love the sea, and bought a yacht. His native assurance (which was, however, far from impudence), joined to the confidence generally inspired by a great income, gave a rare intrepidity to the expression of his views, and, what was still rarer in so young a man, his views were mostly sound ones. Underneath his light and genial manner there was a substratum of good sense and good feelings, which made honest folks like Frederic Mayne the more, the more they knew of him. On the other hand it



must be confessed that folks who did not act upon the square had reason to complain of his manners. He had a natural antipathy to a rogue such as is seldom felt in these days, and still more seldom expressed. When other people would cautiously hint that Jones the Duke, or Jones the Dustman (for it was all one to the ex-midshipman), was 'shakey,' Mayne would state quite plainly, 'Jones is a scoundrel.' And all the Joneses (who are a numerous race) resented this.

If the midshipman had continued in his profession he would have found 'between decks' inconvenient as he grew up, for he was very tall. His complexion was difficult, save for a metaphysician, to speak of, because he had none; his face was bronzed by wind and weather, and the salt foam; but if you could have got down to it, it would probably have been a fair one. His hair was light brown, and curled over his forehead like a boy's; his eyes were blue and laughing—but with a spice of mischief in them that redeemed their expression from that of mere good nature.

His meeting with his old college friend at Archester was most cordial, and he had not been five minutes in the break before he had made friends with everybody. His manners had that charm of naturalness which dispenses with the formulas of introduction, and which, if they were but general, would save years of human life now wasted in the conventional twaddle that is considered necessary to first acquaintanceship. Before she got home even Lady Arden had acknowledged to herself that Mr. Frederic Mayne was 'an acquisition,' a compliment she generally reserved for persons of title who came to settle in the neighbourhood. Milly was fairly enchanted with him, and would have shown her approbation openly but for the wicked raillery in which George had indulged at breakfast time. The new arrival had said something to interest or amuse every member of the party, not exclusive of little Frankie, to whom he told a dreadful ghost story, of how he was visited by a short but expansive being all in white. 'And what do you think it was?' he inquired, after the thrilling narrative.

'Well, I dare say it was only a nightmare,' said Frankie, made sceptical by the other's laughing eye.

'A very good shot, my boy. It was not a nightmare, however, but something very like it; it was a clothes-horse.'

You would never have guessed, had you seen the party drive up the avenue, laughing and chatting, that they had a stranger among them.

Sir Robert, as his custom was, stood at the door to welcome the visitor, and on him, too, by a few genuine expressions of admiration of the picturesqueness of the Hall, and its situation, the new arrival made a most favourable impression. A desert island—he did not add with Rabelais (on account of the ladies) 'with somebody kicking you behind'—was said to be welcome, observed the guest to a storm-tossed mariner like himself, how much more must be the fairyland of Halcombe.

If his eye wandered unconsciously to Millicent, as if to include in his admiration the elves themselves, Lady Arden forgave it; for the maternal heart is placable towards young gentlemen with five thousand a year.

Evelyn's calm cold looks—for he took the pain in them for coldness—surprised him even more than her beauty; he had a vague impression that she was engaged to his friend, and, therefore, perhaps, expected a somewhat warmer greeting.

Mr. Ferdinand Walcot did not put in an appearance—which was no matter of disappointment. Mayne had heard all about him from Gresham, and not only quite understood that he should meet with no cordial reception from the ruling spirit of the Hall, but was quite prepared to do battle with him, if occasion offered. He was 'a warm friend,' and though it could not be added with justice, 'a bitter enemy,' he was wont to take up his friends' quarrels with considerable alacrity.

Under these circumstances it was rather curious that on the first occasion when Mr. Walcot and Mr. Mayne did meet—which was at the dinner-table that evening—they should find themselves on the same side in a certain argument.

Sir Robert, for a wonder, had happened to notice the depression of Frank's spirits, and when the ladies had withdrawn, remarked upon it to his brother-in-law.

'I believe you were right in the matter of the lad's going to school, Ferdinand, after all,' he said. 'He seems to me to want tone.'

'Frank's nature is peculiar,' returned Walcot, who had, as we know, altered his views about Frank's going to school; 'his case is one, perhaps, in which the mother must be said to be the best judge, and I remember Lady Arden took a decided view.'

'Still a public school, as everybody says, when "tone" in a boy seems to be wanting,' pursued Sir Robert, with hesitation—'Eh, what do *you* say, Mr. Mayne?'

'Well, sir, it depends upon whether the school has got the tone to give him. All I can say is, mine had not, and it was a public one.'

'You hear that, Arden,' observed Mr. Walcot; 'you and I are only theorising about this matter, as we were both brought up under home influences; but this gentleman speaks from personal experience.'

'And I am sorry to say from anything but a pleasant one,' laughed Mr. Mayne. 'The Public School interest is a very powerful one, and, therefore, many things are tolerated in it, which would otherwise be scouted, just as happens on a smaller scale in the City.'

'But the public feeling of a public school is good, Mayne,' observed Gresham.

'It may be so, or not; it depends generally upon the character of one or two leading boys, and even upon the traditions they leave behind them.'

'The masters, however, are chosen with great care, I understand, and from the cream of their respective Universities,' remarked Sir Robert.

'Well, sir, the cream goes mainly to make the butter for the Professors,' answered Mayne; 'the masters, however, are well enough as a general rule, though I happened to fall in with a precious bad specimen. When I write my book called "*Scoundrels I Have Met*," he will occupy a prominent place in it.'

'It is not usual to find scoundrels among the scholars who form our Public School Masters,' remarked Mr. Walcot, with a glance at his brother-in-law.

'Of course not; if it were so very common, I would not trouble you with the details, but as it is they are curious. The man's name I have in my mind was Horner. He had his particular

"favourites" among the boys, and, what was worse, his particular "aversions." He used to tamper with the marks in the class-book—just as the villain in "Never Too Late to Mend," altered the figures in the cranks. I remember a sharp, bright-eyed little fellow of the name of Archer (very like your stepson Frank, Sir Robert, which, perhaps, reminded me of the occurrence) being persecuted by this man in the most wicked manner. He told lie after lie to get him flogged, and used the Head Master, who was a great stickler for discipline and authority, as a catspaw to carry out his baseness generally. The boy's character was utterly warped by him. The harm that scoundrel had in his power to do was incalculable, and he did his worst.'

'I suppose he was not very fond of *you*,' suggested Mr. Walcot, drily.

'Perhaps not; but he never tried his tricks on me; his mind though malevolent was judicious. I should probably have blown him up with gunpowder. As it was it was lucky for him I had no quarrel with him on my own account. I remember meeting him in a London street after I had joined the Navy, and feeling the greatest inclination to pitch into him for his vile treatment of poor Archer; but he had his cheek muffled in a handkerchief, and looked so seedy that I let him alone. "Ah, Mr. Mayne," he said, pretending to be pleased to see me, "How are you?" Then thinking I was going to inquire after his health (which I wasn't), he continued, "I'm unfortunately just going to the dentist's."'

"I'm glad to hear it," said I, "and hope it will be a double one."

Gresham burst out laughing, and even Sir Robert smiled; but it was in a very grave voice that Mr. Walcot observed, 'Such conduct in a very young man was, perhaps, excusable, but you will surely not now contend, Mr. Mayne, that it was right or kind.'

'My dear sir,' answered Mayne, 'I do not "contend" about the matter; few actions of mine have given me more entire satisfaction than that retort. He understood by it at once all that I had in my mind. If people were always "kind" as you term it to the cruel and unjust, those persons would have it all

their own way, and would never mend. It is our Christian duty to mend them.'

'That is a new reading of the New Testament, indeed,' observed Mr. Walcot.

'Still, my dear Ferdinand,' observed Sir Robert, 'it must be remembered that Mr. Mayne was not avenging his own wrongs in expressing that somewhat ill-natured wish.'

'That is true. He has indicated, however, what he would have done to Mr. Horner, if he had given *him* annoyance; he would have blown him up with gunpowder.'

Logically Mr. Walcot had clearly the best of it; but other elements beside logic go to form social opinion; and this observation apparently so conclusive of Mr. Mayne's revengeful and truculent disposition was received with a shout of laughter, in which the accused person joined as heartily as the rest. Almost for the first time that well-tempered and incisive weapon, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's tongue failed him. So far from being shocked at Mr. Frederick Mayne's opinions, it was clear that Sir Robert was rather pleased with him than otherwise. His hatred of tyranny and sympathy with the oppressed, though manifested only in a schoolboy, had struck an answering cord within him.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## IN THE ARBOUR.

READER, do you know what it is to live in the country all the live-long year? If not, never jeer at your country cousins, for you know not what they suffer. You go to the Lakes, perhaps, in the summer, or to the seaside in the autumn, and when winter comes you return to London and live snug. You have no conception, perhaps, except from pictures (which always fall short of the reality) of the melancholy events that take place in agricultural localities after what is called the fall of the leaf. In the first place the arrangements for lighting are very imperfect, so that you can only see your way about for a few hours; and in those, if you have no passion for destroying life with dog or gun, there is very little to be done. The great object of the simple folks one meets seems to be to keep themselves warm; and when they can do it, which is not often, they are very pleased. 'We are quite in a glow,' they say. This reminds one of a very early age of civilization, when 'Ha, ha! I have seen the fire; I am warm,' would be uttered in a voice of triumph. In the country, in the winter time, it is *always* wet under foot, either with damp or with snow, and it is generally wet overhead. 'We are quite dry,' exclaim the inhabitants in the winter, when they are fortunate enough to return so from their melancholy walks.

It was not winter yet at Halcombe, but the state of things I have described was beginning. At 4 p.m., everybody was at home who could *get* home, and darkness reigned for the next sixteen hours. Under such circumstances even moderately agreeable guests in a country house are invaluable.

'Country hospitality' in winter is proverbial, and no wonder.

You may therefore imagine what a godsend was Mr. Frederic Mayne, who had a smile or a story, or a sea song for every

one, just as they pleased. His spirits were inexhaustible, and were applied judiciously ; milk (with a dash of rum in it) for babies, and milk punch (not too strong, but stiffish) for the grown males. He took Frankie under his special protection, perhaps because he reminded him of young Archer.

'You mope,' he said. 'You do not enjoy life as it is your duty to do. What's the matter ?'

The tears were very near Frank's eyes ; but he only said 'Nothing,' with a look over his shoulder which was not lost upon his interlocutor.

'Somebody has bullied this child,' thought he to himself. 'It must be' (I am sorry to repeat such a word, but it was not uttered aloud remember), 'it must be that brute Walcot.'

Mr. Mayne was apt to jump to conclusions, and occasionally, as must needs happen, found firm ground.

'My dear Frank, you want bracing ; you never seem to me to be doing anything.'

'What *can* a boy do ?' said Frankie, despairingly.

'Well, that depends. I knew a boy—or, at least, I knew his son afterwards—who did this pretty thing. He was a poor boy, who worked on a pilot boat at Bambridge during our war with France. She was off the coast, on the look-out for ships, when a French lugger privateer hove in sight, with twelve oars on each side. That was not the sort of ship the pilot boat was on the look out for, and her crew got into their coble to row to land, but the boy James Wallis—a name it is worth while for any 'boy to remember—declined to go ; he said he would 'take his chance,' only he gave them his watch and the few shillings he had, to take to his brother. The Frenchman came up, lowered his main topsail and lug sails, and tried to grapple, but the boy put the helm down, and went about, though they fired at him with their small arms pretty handsomely. This little game compelled the Frenchman to make sail and tack, but Wallis—being very clever at it—tacked and weathered him. He was fired at continually at thirty yards' distance, but yet he contrived to repeat the manœuvre *eighteen times*, when a fresh breeze sprung up, and he showed them a clean pair of heels, and got safe to Bambridge. That's what a boy can do, my lad."



Frank's cheeks were crimson with excitement, and his eyes glistened with pleasure.

'I wish I had been that boy, Mr. Mayne.'

'Quite right; so do I. He was as big a man as the other Wallace, though he was but sixteen. Well, we can all do something; only we must never be afraid; and we never need be so unless we have done something to be ashamed of.'

'Ah!' said Frankie, with a sigh that was almost a groan.

'Hullo! What have you done to be ashamed of?'

'Oh, nothing—at least—' and driven into a corner the child told his new friend, not about his little 'attempted murder' case, but about meeting the giant. 'Everybody thinks I have told a lie about it, Mr. Mayne, and yet it was all true.'

'Very good. I have seen several giants myself, though never one with six legs. When did it happen?'

And Frankie told him the exact date.

Later in the day, Mr. Mayne had a little private talk with Lady Arden; as it was private it cannot be repeated; indeed the rapturous manner in which her ladyship took his hand when it was over, could hardly be dwelt upon by a sober writer who has always the proprieties in his mind's eye.

'You have a kind heart, Mr. Mayne,' were the words with which that interview ended; 'and I am deeply obliged to you.'

Evelyn Nicoll was a puzzle to Mr. Mayne. All women were so, more or less; he did not pretend to understand a sex which says 'No,' when it means 'Yes,' and can shed tears by a mere effort of the will. What was unknown to him, however, this modest young fellow always respected, and when in addition we take into account the claim to courtesy and honour that women have on every chivalrous nature, it may be imagined what a fool they had made of Mr. Frederic Mayne in his time. If he found a young person faithless—and it required the strongest evidence to convince him that such a thing could be—he sighed and bade her adieu by no means in anger; and at once transferred his allegiance and credulity elsewhere.

He had always some divinity in earthly shape whom he worshipped till he found out that her feet were of clay; but his last ideal had just gone off (in honourable marriage be it understood, though a wholly unworthy person) with a French

Marquis, and for the moment Mr. Mayne was without a beloved object. It had struck him at first sight that if Evelyn Nicoll had not been bespoken by his friend she would have been the very one to be his own heart's queen; and though honour erased the thought as soon as formed, his devotion, in platonic shape, remained. It grieved him to see one so young and beautiful so silent and depressed. And, like a doctor who loves his calling for its own sake, despising fees and even 'the etiquette of the profession,' which at least requires one to be called in, he sought about for the cause of her calamity, in hopes to cure it. The result of his investigations, which were carried on without subtlety, though with infinite precaution, was most deplorable.

He was from his marine habits an early riser—for folks at sea, though there is nothing whatever to do upon it, rise with the albatross, or other bird that answers to the matutinal lark on land—and let us hope are as happy as the days are long. He got up at Halcombe before the housemaids, and was wont to unfasten the front door with his own hands, and wander about the solitary grounds like a ghost who had broken his leave of absence and despised the summons of cock-crow. There was a curlew with one clipped wing in the garden whose friendship he cultivated extremely; and, after some conversation with him, he would climb the windy down and listen to the battle of the waves on the sea shore. Then he would come back at an hour that was still early, and, if possible, administer 'cold pig,' or some other irritant, to his friend Gresham, to persuade him to get up and be in time for breakfast.

He was returning from the shore one morning, when the young lady we have spoken of, who had risen half out of her grave, attracted his attention in the church-yard; and he stopped a moment, as he well might, to examine the simplicity of her demeanour. As he did so, certain sounds came to his ear, brought by the wind over the high wall, on the other side of which was the garden terrace: it was a conversation between two persons whose voices, though one of them was familiar enough to him, he did not recognise, the reason of which was that the language the speaker used was German, a tongue with which he himself was tolerably acquainted, thanks to repeated visits to the Continent.

'No, I am not happy, dear,' were the first words that reached his ear; 'but the reason is not what you ascribe it to. I am quite content to wait for you; if I should win you after all, I should think myself well repaid for waiting. But I do not like this life of duplicity. Every kindness of Lady Arden's cuts me to the heart.'

'Tut—tut. If one must hold a candle to the devil sometimes, how much more necessary it is in our case to keep him in the dark. My enemy—our enemy—suspects us as it is; and as for Evelyn, you know as well as I do——'

Here Mayne, who felt that he had heard more than enough, gave a loud hem, and there was a scuttling of feet, as if he had started fifty rabbits on dry leaves. Then very slowly, to give time for the couple to escape, and also because his thoughts were grave and serious—he moved towards the door in the wall and opened it. The terrace was deserted as he had foreseen, and showed no trace of its recent tenants; but he had little doubt that they had been George Gresham and Miss Hurt. As to the former, indeed, he was quite sure, as soon as he heard the word 'Evelyn' fall from his lips, and why should they have conversed in German had Gresham's companion been any other than the German governess? It was a great blow to Mayne, for he had a particular dislike to underhand tricks and ways, and he had hitherto imagined his friend to be equally frank; yet here he was making love to another woman under the very roof of his intended bride! It was no wonder that poor Evelyn was so quiet and silent; her woman's instinct had no doubt warned her that she had lost her lover's allegiance, though she might little suspect with whom he had played the traitor. For there was one thing, quite independent of the few passages of conversation that had met his ear, which convinced Mayne that the matter was serious; that his friend was not merely amusing himself with a little flirtation, which, however reprehensible, might be condoned or pardoned. And this was the early hour of the morning. Mayne was quite sure from what he knew of Gresham, that nothing short of the most serious entanglement of the affections could have persuaded his friend to get up so long before breakfast time.

One half of the terrace—the more remote one from the Hall

—was bordered by a tall hedge of yew; the other was open to the view, and terminated in an arbour, walled with fircones, the favourite resort just now for the unhappy Frank, who preferred sitting there alone with a 'story book' to running the risk of meeting his late antagonist Jem Groad. It was obvious that the interview of the two young people had taken place in the hidden part of the terrace, and that they had 'gone off R. C.' (but without the necessity of a stage direction) that is to say, by the way that led to the stables, in order to escape observation. It was, therefore, without the least suspicion that he could be intruding on any one's privacy that Frederic Mayne took his way to the Arbour in order to sit down there over a pipe to meditate upon what course of action he should pursue in the circumstances which had been thus brought under his notice. From one point of view, of course, it was not his business; but on the other hand, he felt strongly tempted to give his friend a 'piece of his mind' not so much perhaps as regarded his little indiscretion with the governess, as his infidelity to Evelyn. He thought that young lady's case excessively hard.

As he passed by the half-closed door he heard—well, it was not a sneeze such as men sneeze; a violent ebullition of frenzied sound, which shakes the sneezer all about him—but a delicate Tishaw; a very duodecimo of a sneeze, and even that cut short as it were by a certain sharp compulsion. It was to the observing ear the sneeze of a lady who was extremely anxious not to sneeze. Perhaps it was the pungency of the fircones, perhaps it was the misty atmosphere that hangs about all arbours, but whatever it was she couldn't help it. Any other sound coming from any arbour at that hour—for no one patronises these retreats till the sun has rendered them attractive—Mayne would have put down to beast or bird; but a sneeze, and especially a tishaw (which only an Italian greyhound can imitate, and there was none such at Halcombe) is eminently human. Some people in Mayne's position would have passed on, and pretended not to hear it; but we venture to think very few people.

There are doubtless some Sir Peter Teazles in the world who would have resisted the temptation to see what the pretty mil-

liner was like who was behind the screen ; but, as the song says, 'That's not you nor me.' The majority even of male mortals have some curiosity, and in Mayne's case was it not his duty if Miss Elise Hurt had taken refuge in that arbour to address to her a few words of remonstrance respecting her 'goings on' with Mr. George Gresham. Perhaps she did not quite understand that he was an engaged man. At all events he felt he *must* know who the lady was. He was quite certain that he was not intruding upon a loving pair—unless, indeed, there were two pairs of turtle doves on the terrace that morning, which was unlikely, because he had heard the male bird take flight in the opposite direction ; indeed he had thought both had gone that way, but it now seemed that he was mistaken ; one had fled towards the stables, the other into the arbour. As there was no egress from the latter place except on to the gravel walk before him, he felt secure of the fugitive, and actually stopped to light his pipe. Under the veil of tobacco he could enter the arbour without suggesting to the fair being within that he had heard that 'Tishaw !' he had come to smoke, and nothing (he made up his mind) was more likely to astonish him than to find Miss Elise Hurt there. As he pushed open the half-closed door, he heard something retreating before him with a sweeping sound, never yet made by man. Then a pair of black eyes flashed upon him in the semi-darkness, and a gentle voice in accents of alarm inquired, 'Who is it ?'

'It is I, madam, Frederic Mayne.'

If his accents were not those of alarm, they were pregnant with surprise ; he had meant to imitate astonishment at the discovery of the German governess, but he was very genuinely astonished at discovering another young person altogether. She had a diminutive, but very graceful shape ; a face of considerable beauty and full of expression—just now it wore the timidity of bashful terror, and a voice, as we have hinted, exquisitely tender. There was a strange contrast, moreover, between the colour of her eyes and of her hair, the former being black as jet, and the latter a light brown, which marred her beauty, and produced an almost grotesque effect, and then she wore a dress of some bright green material exacerbated by cherry-col-

oured trimmings. It was not Cinderella in her kitchen dress, but Cinderella in her Sunday best, when her cousin, the Life-guardsmen, came to court her. No lady, however poor, could willingly have put on such an attire.

'I am very sorry,' said she; 'I am afraid I have no business here. You won't say that you found me here, will you, sir?'

'Well, really—no, of course I won't, if you don't wish it. But who are you?'

'I am the young ladies' maid, sir, and thinking no one belonging to the family would be about so early, I thought I would have a walk in the garden. And finding this bootiful arbour, I just set down in it.'

'But it strikes me as very damp and cold,' remonstrated Mr. Mayne.

'Yes, sir, but then I dote on arbours. To have tea in an arbour; oh, Lor!—'

This was not an exclamation of delight; it was one of horror, which immediately communicated itself to Mr. Frederic Mayne, for it was caused by the sound of approaching footsteps. To be found in the arbour with the young ladies' maid of the house where one is staying is a position from which the mind of man—even the *mens conscia recti*—shudders to contemplate.

In one stride Mr. Mayne gained the gravel walk, and in his next, which he took mechanically, he almost fell into the arms of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.



## CHAPTER XX.

## ANOTHER BIRD CAUGHT.

'YOU are an early riser, Mr. Mayne,' was Mr. Walcot's grave salutation.

'Yes,' stammered the other, 'I am.'

If his own reputation only had been at stake he would have felt only a slight embarrassment; he would certainly not have stooped to concealment; but his chivalric nature led him astray for once—as chivalric natures sometimes do. He shrank from discovery, for the sake of the young ladies' maid, and wished to shield her, if he could. It was certain, by Mr. Walcot's face, that he suspected nothing.

'I like my pipe before breakfast,' continued Mr. Mayne, leading the way on to the terrace, and intending to get his companion behind the yew-tree wall, that the young person in green and red might make her escape; 'and I love the morning air.'

'And you find it fresher in the arbour, do you?' inquired Mr. Walcot.

The observation was a somewhat contemptuous one; but Mr. Mayne didn't mind that, if he could only get the man away; and he was coming, thank goodness! though at a very deliberate pace.

'Well, I have been walking a good deal—one's old quarter-deck habits, you know—and felt a little tired; so I sat down—What a lovely garden you have here; even at this late time of the year, when the cold and damp—'

He might have said 'induces sneezing;' for at that moment the 'tishaw, tishaw!' broke forth from the arbour behind them. Mr. Frederick Mayne turned scarlet.

'It seems you had a companion in your solitude,' observed Mr. Walcot dryly.

'No, indeed, I hadn't—at least—I do assure you, upon my



honour, this was exactly how it happened: I heard that very sneeze precisely from that very place; and curiosity induced me to open the door.'

'And take a seat,' observed Mr. Walcot, with the air of one who supplies an hiatus in a narrative.

'Did I say I took a seat? If so, it was an exaggeration; the young woman herself will bear me witness that I was not in her company more than a minute.'

'Time flies when we are happily employed,' remarked Mr. Walcot sententiously. 'But if I may ask the question—and I think I am justified in so doing, as an intimate friend of Sir Robert Arden and his family—who *was* the "young woman," as you call her? of course, I can see her for myself—but

'Upon my word and honour! Mr. Walcot, I don't know who she is,' interrupted the other earnestly. 'I never set eyes on her, except within the last five minutes; but I believe—I entreat you not to speak about it, for her sake; though she was no more to blame than I am—'

'Very likely,' put in Mr. Wilcot dryly; 'still there was blame somewhere, as you admit.'

'No, I don't. I only admit that the circumstances are embarrassing—nay, if you will have it so, suspicious. You are taking an honourable course in letting the poor girl make her escape, for of course she would be overwhelmed with confusion; but the whole affair was the result of the purest accident.'

Poor Mr. Mayne had never felt such a fool before, and at the same time suffered such humiliation. To have to ask a favour of this man, whom he disliked, was most distressing to him; but to get an innocent girl into trouble was still more abhorrent to his feelings.

'The purest accident,' observed Mr. Walcot, quietly, 'is an expression of some significance, for though there are many accidents, there are few pure ones. You have not yet favoured me with the information as to who the "poor girl" is.'

'I tell you I don't know,' answered Mr. Mayne, with irritation. 'I only know she is the maid to the young ladies.'

'Oh, indeed!'

Never were two words uttered with greater stress and point.

'Of course I feel the full absurdity of my position ; but once more I give you my honour as a gentleman that the girl is not to blame.'

'In cases of this kind, Mr. Mayne, a man's honour—at least some great authorities have said so—is bound at all hazards to defend the lady.'

'You do not believe my word, then ?

'Tush, tush, sir. These matters are made no better by a quarrel. I think it hardly consistent with my duty to be silent on this matter ; it is not the first time that you have left this house at untimely hours—nay, I impute nothing, but merely state how it strikes a disinterested mind. Your "quarter-deck habits" may, as you say, induce morning walks, but landsmen have no very high opinion of them. However, Sir Robert Arden's health is in such an unsatisfactory state that I shall tell him nothing of this at present. I do not pledge myself to perpetual silence on the matter, but shall be guided by circumstances—Good morning, sir.' With these words Mr. Walcot opened the door in the wall that led into the stable yard, closed it sharply behind him, and even slid the bolt to prevent his late companion following him.

No insult could be more complete, and yet there was nothing for it but to bear it. No bird was ever more completely in the toils of the Halecombe fowler than was Mr. Frederic Mayne.

His first impulse was to go straight to Lady Arden, and explain the circumstances of the case ; but the very best that could happen to him would, he felt, be an overwhelming storm of ridicule, which would not even be confined to the members of the family, but would extend to the servant's hall. On the other hand, if Walcot should keep his word, and be silent for the time, every moment would be of advantage to him (Frederic Mayne), for slander stale is feeble compared with slander fresh ; and in this case it might well be ascribed to personal animosity. His proper course would naturally have been to confide in Gresham, but he shrank from this because just now he felt by no means so friendly towards him as of yore, by reason of his treachery to Evelyn. Moreover, he was by no means

sure but that the object of Gresham's tender affection on the terrace had been the very cause of his own calamitous condition, namely, the young ladies' maid herself. It was true he had overheard the happy pair (whoever they were), speaking in the German tongue, and therefore his suspicions had at once attached themselves to the governess. But if it were she to whom Gresham had been paying court, how came the young ladies' maid in the arbour, within a few yards of the lovers? His head seemed to go round and round as he sought to unravel these mysteries, and he decided, at all events, to do nothing until he could consider the whole matter more calmly.

In the meantime Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was revolving in his mind, on the other side of the wall, what steps, if any, *he* should take in the affair, which (however much it might have shocked him on moral grounds) had certainly happened most advantageously to his own interests. He had got Mr. Frederic Mayne upon the hip; and whether he should give him the *coup de grace*—that is to say his *congé*—upon the spot, or not, was what occupied his thoughts. That he could do it, was quite certain—and we may as well say at once that he had very good reasons for his confidence; but would it not be more judicious to let him be for the present? To have Mr. Mayne at the Hall in an independent state, as the friend of his foe, and with an evidently hostile disposition to himself was a very different thing to having him there, as would now be the case, under his thumb. Frank, Evelyn, Gresham, Mayne, were all more or less in his power, or had at all events good reason to stand in fear of him, and this was a situation which the master of it greatly appreciated. Mr. Walcot regarded them much as a first-rate whip regards his four-in-hand; he enjoyed driving them none the less that some of the steeds were spirited and ready to kick over the traces. His safest plan would without doubt have been to get rid of the one that had last been broken in—if he could be said to be broken in—but there were advantages to be gained by retaining him for the present, independent of the pleasure of making him feel the curb.

The stable yard opened into the back premises of the house, and those again, as we have said, on to the rose garden in front of Sir Robert's study. It was thither that Mr. Walcot was

bound, and during the small space of time it took him to traverse this pace, he decided upon the course to be adopted. His mind was eminently practical—which generally means a mind absolutely free from imagination; there was not only no wavering in its resolves, but no wandering from the point—none of those digressions in which even the most logical are prone to indulge. There was no “shilly shally,” “willy nilly,” about it. These short and sharp decisions save time, which is money, which is everything. Occasionally, however (which is fortunate for the rest of the world) the practical mind decides wrongly.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## TO THE TOP OF HIS BENT.

WE have said that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was rapid in his thoughts and actions; his movements, too, had all the quickness of a cat, and its gait. He had not slammed that garden door in Mr. Mayne's face—he was quite incapable of such an action; he had only closed it suddenly and very softly, and then slid in the bolt. When he had thus secured himself, no triumph lit up his intelligent countenance more than shines upon the engine-driver's who has just shunted a cattle-truck on to a siding. His face, on the contrary, became immediately more grave and thoughtful than it had been while he was conversing with his late companion, and especially it lost its cynical expression. By the time he had reached the door that opened on the rose garden his features had assumed a certain sympathetic air which well became them. He opened and closed this door with the caution of an Eastern slave, and his feet fell on the shaven lawn on which he now found himself without a sound. They led him thus to the window of Sir Robert's study, where he stood awhile in silence as if awaiting some summons from within, which was not, however, forthcoming. He could see the tenant of the apartment seated at his desk, with his head leaning on his hands; his eyes were fixed upon some white object close before them, apparently a letter, by which his attention was entirely absorbed.

At a light touch of Walcot's finger on the window-pane, however, Sir Robert started up. At first his face expressed amazement—nay, apprehension: but on recognizing his visitor it at once assumed an air of satisfaction. He hurried quickly to the glass door which opened on the rose-garden, and admitted him.

'I am glad you are come, Ferdinand. I would have sent to fetch you, but that I shrank from employing vulgar hands,

even as accessories. I —— such a manifestation has been vouchsafed me !

‘What—have you seen anything?’

‘No—at least I have not seen my darling; but I have had word from her.’

‘Indeed. She has spoken to you then?’

‘No, not so. Look at this, Ferdinand.’

He held tightly in his trembling hand, as though it were something too precious to extend to another, a slip of paper, with a word or two of writing on it. ‘See, read it.’

Walcot read the inscription, which consisted of but three words, ‘I am here.’

‘Well, well,’ cried the other impatiently; ‘do you recognise it?’ His pale face was flushed, his eyes shown with eager fire.

‘I see, of course, that it is Madeline’s handwriting—or an imitation of it.’

‘Ah! That was just what I thought to myself as soon as I could think of anything save the communication itself,’ returned Sir Robert, with a strange look of triumph; ‘My cautious Ferdinand,’ said I, will be sure to say “an imitation.”’

‘Of course, I was,’ returned the other quietly. ‘It is an idea that must have occurred to anybody. If I had my doubts about your really hearing Madeline’s voice the other night—although I grant you have convinced me of that—how much more should I doubt such evidence as this? Three little words—a mere tyro with his fingers who had ever seen a scrap of her handwriting could cheat the eye so far.’

‘He would not cheat *my* eyes,’ answered Sir Robert, gravely; ‘but no matter. Listen. My darling Madeline and I never had so much as one word of disagreement throughout our married life. We talked of this one day, and I said it was a thing impossible to last; it must needs be that we should sometimes differ. “We may differ, darling,” was her reply, “but there will be no words. I shall simply let you know that I am cross.” (Think of Madeline being cross!) Accordingly, when she was opposed to any view of mine, which happened once or twice only, and always upon some trivial matter, she

would playfully write her name on a slip of paper, with a certain sign upon it, and place it on my desk, where I found *this*.'

'And what was the sign?' inquired Walcot, smiling.

'In the corner of the paper was a X. It signified "*Madeline is cross*." Now in order to put her communication out of the possibility of doubt as to its genuineness, she has made the private sign in this case.'

'I see,' said Walcot, examining the paper with scrupulous care, and speaking very gravely.

'You have no doubts now, Ferdinand?'

'No, I have no doubts.'

'What then? Your brow is clouded; is there anything in this that augurs ill?'

'Nothing more than what is expressed. I don't understand your logic, Arden. Why should Madeline seek to prove her own identity? It seems to me that she has simply expressed displeasure.'

'Great Heaven, I never thought of that! My Madeline displeased with me! Oh, this is terrible! What word, or thought, or deed of mine can have vexed her?'

Mr. Walcot shrugged his shoulders.

'My dear Arden, my best services, as you know, are always at your disposal; but I am not omnipotent nor omniscient. The question you ask me is one which only yourself can answer.'

'I can *not*, Ferdinand. My mind is unconscious of offence. If I had doubted of her presence, of her living interest in me, of her continued love—but I never did, from the first moment that she reached her sweet hand down from Heaven to comfort me. It was *you* who doubted.'

'I know it, I grant it,' answered Walcot, coldly. 'It was my duty—on your account—to doubt, while doubt was possible.'

'Then what is she vexed about with *me*,' exclaimed Sir Robert, vehemently. 'What lightest thought of mine has wronged her?'

'It can be no light thing that causes one of the immortals to express displeasure,' answered Walcot, gravely. 'Look into your own heart, Arden; it is not for man to read it; though it seems *she* has done so.'



'Ah, I have it,' cried Sir Robert; 'it is my will! That is the only thing of any importance in which I have been of late engaged. She must be dissatisfied with the conditions of my will.'

'I should say "Impossible,"' said Walcot, thoughtfully, 'except that such manifestations as these have nought to do with possibilities. It is, at all events, to the last degree unlikely. Why should one so pure and self-forgetful, even when in the flesh, take, as a spirit, any heed of such gross matters? No, it cannot be. Yet, as you say, she is displeased.'

It was not Sir Robert who had said so; but as that gentleman was convinced that such was the case, it was immaterial. It was a habit of Mr. Walcot's, doubtless induced by modesty, to attribute his own sagacious suggestions to others, and especially in the case of his brother-in-law.

'She is not solicitous on her own account, of course,' said Sir Robert, musing; 'it can matter to her nothing personally as to how I dispose of my property. Still she may be thinking of one dear and near to her—and yet I did not forget you, Ferdinand,' he added plaintively.

'I beg, Arden, that you will not allude to such a subject,' replied Mr. Walcot, with some trace of irritation; 'in the first place even putting the matter on its lowest grounds, it can never concern me as your legatee, for I am persuaded you will long outlive me; and, secondly, I do not choose to pry and peer into such intentions as you speak of. Even by the conventions of the world, it is agreed that they should be of a private nature; and, to my mind, any reference to them is most painful.'

'But why refuse me your assistance, your advice, Ferdinand?' answered the other, imploringly.

'Because I have none to give you. You will act, of course—if I know you—as your conscience dictates. You will not, I am sure, be swayed in such a matter by vulgar considerations—or associations—of any kind.'

'By associations do you mean the relations which I have formed by my second marriage, as apart from George, for instance?'

'I must really decline to answer that question, Arden; I

cannot venture to indicate your duty in a matter so delicate. Your own feelings are the best guide.'

'Of that I am somewhat doubtful, Ferdinand ; it is just there that I do not feel sure of myself, that I require a helping hand. If Madeline is vexed with what I have done, will she not point out what is amiss, think you ? Or even may she not be mistaken, and, in that case, how am I to set myself right with her ?'

Mr. Walcot shook his head. 'These immortal beings are not subject to error, Arden, like us poor creatures.'

'But it is intolerable to picture my darling as displeased with me. How can I tell her that I am unconscious of offence, that I am eager, above all things, to obey her wishes ? If I write to her as she has done to me—'

Again Mr. Walcot shook his head.

'The spirit of the departed cannot be communicated with through such material means ; but they occasionally vouchsafe their visible presence to those who sincerely and reverentially desire it. I do not know whether that is your case.'

'Nor do I know myself, Ferdinand. There was a time—quite lately—when I thought I could not have borne to look upon her. But now—now that I have seen her handwriting, as well as heard her voice, what was once too awful has grown more familiar. Can mere desire on my part, think you, bring about this miracle ?'

'I am not sure.'

'But are there no means by which our volition can be supplemented ? It is written that wicked spirits could be so compelled by spells and charms ; may not good ones by some act of love and faith be similarly attracted earthward ?'

'Hush, speak not of compulsion. You may even now be wounding ears of which you little guess. There *are* means such as you speak of ; but whether they may prove efficacious or not does not rest with me.'

'What are they ?' inquired Sir Robert, in a hushed and awe-struck tone. 'Tell me, Ferdinand ; I entreat you, tell me.'

'They are various, my dear friend, and vary with the circumstances. I can only say that in respect to one of them you are favourably situated, since you are in possession of that piece of paper.'

'How so?' inquired the other, so breathless with excitement that his words were scarcely audible.

'Thus: if you hold in your hand a scrap of handwriting of the spirit you wish to see—provided it contains his or her autograph—and call her by her name three times at midnight, it is said—for I have no personal knowledge of the matter—that she will appear before you.'

'She will appear before me?' repeated Sir Robert, softly.

'I do not guarantee it, of course,' observed Walcot, gravely. 'I may even have been indiscreet in saying this; do not blame me if I arouse false hopes. You have compelled me.'

'I understand, my friend, and shall in no case blame you,' answered Sir Robert. 'You have laid me under one obligation the more, Ferdinand—that is all.'

'I am not aware of that, Arden,' returned the other earnestly: 'I almost regret that I was not more reticent. You are neither strong nor well, and, as it is, the strain upon your spiritual nature is telling upon you. I fear, supposing that this privilege is granted to you, that the sudden shock—though it may have nought but bliss in it—may do you mischief.'

'What! My Madeline do me a mischief? No, Ferdinand. It is true my health has suffered of late. I know what you would prescribe—"Travel; a complete change;" and perhaps I may some day take your advice. But at present I can think of nothing—nothing but my lost darling. I have thanked Heaven before now that I had more concern with the dead than with the living—by which I meant communion only; the echo of thought to thought. But now, if I indeed should see her—— Oh! Ferdinand, the thought unmans me quite.'

'Because, as I say again, you are not yourself, Arden. How often have you and I—speaking of man's last hours, when he stands upon the verge of spirit life—agreed that his utterances are valueless; that he is physically too prostrated to bear a sound mind within him? And is not *your* case—ailing and nerve-stricken—yet standing, perchance, on the brink of some supreme revelation, a parallel one? Can you honestly say that you feel equal to such an occasion? Is your logical faculty fit to grapple with what may, indeed, be great spiritual truths, but may also be delusions?'

'Delusions!' exclaimed Sir Robert. 'You have yourself acknowledged that every possibility of delusion has been eliminated. No; it is possible I may be fated to be tried beyond my strength. But what alternative is offered to me? Can I leave Halcombe—a spot become sacred to me, since my lost Madeline has designed to visit it—without affording the opportunity which, perchance, she seeks of holding speech with me?'

'Well, well, perhaps, you are right, Arden,' returned the other, slowly. 'But at least do not give yourself up a prey to morbid hopes—hopes which nine men out of ten, we know, would designate as those of a madman. I have given you the same advice before, yet I am constrained to repeat it. Play the man, my friend; and above all, be yourself in your associations with those about you. There are strangers coming here to-day, in whose presence, I conjure you, to show no weakness; and with respect to your own belongings, this is still more to be deprecated. Let no one in this house be able to say that Sir Robert Arden was the prey to nervous terrors, before (as is possible) he was called to witness to the truth; before he had the experience of that so-called spiritual manifestation which was, in fact (they will rejoice to say so), the creation of a disordered mind and an enfeebled body. This is not a mere private matter, my friend, affecting your own interests only, however vitally; enormous issues may hang upon it. To you—who knows?—the very "Key of all the Creeds,—the dread Secret of the Ages," may be entrusted.'

Sir Robert shook his head.

'I have no ambition for such greatness, Ferdinand,' he murmured; 'I only wish to see my Madeline. Still, you give me good advice, no doubt. I cannot forget her; no; but, while with others, I will strive to remember other matters.'

'Good; there is the breakfast bell. Let us go in.'

CHAPTER XXII.

A COURT-MARTIAL STORY.

IT was not without some anxiety—such as unhappily, even the innocent often experience in this world—that Ferderic Mayne sat down to the morning meal after that misadventure in the arbour; he knew that, though Ferdinand Waleot could wear a mask to conceal his feelings, Sir Robert was incapable of such deception, and his courteous and hospitable greeting at once informed him that no ‘leprous distilment’ of prejudice or scandal had, for the present, at least, been dropped into his ear.

Knowing, however, or fancying that he knew the nature of the man with whom he had to deal, he was by no means set at ease, and, like any other threatened man, felt much in need of ‘counsel’s opinion.’ For Gresham’s advice he was debarred from applying, because of the secret he had discovered concerning him, and his knowledge of which a feeling of delicacy (not unmingled with resentment) prevented him from revealing; a natural shrinking from making unpleasantness in the house prevented him from making a clean breast of it to his host; and in this perplexity he resolved to confide in a third, and comparatively disinterested party.

From the first, Mayne had greatly taken to the Rev. John Dyneley; there was a frankness about him that appealed strongly to his own open nature, and a modesty in regard to self-assertion which he admired none the less that he was conscious that he did not share the possession of that virtue. His opinion of Dyneley, had he been asked to express it, would have been ‘a right good fellow, and, though a parson, with no nonsense about him.’

Moreover, confidential relations had been already established between them on a certain matter soon to be made public, so that he felt less of embarrassment than he would otherwise

have done in consulting him on a subject so delicate as his adventure of the morning ; lastly, although Dyneley had been becomingly reticent as to the members of the Halcombe family, Mr. Mayne had a suspicion that he entertained no very high opinion of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.

Mr. Raynes and his wife—from whose house Frank had been returning home when he encountered that incredible giant—were coming to spend the day at the Hall, and little preparations were going on in consequence which afforded Mayne an opportunity of slipping unobserved away from the house, and paying a visit to the Manor Farm. He found the Curate with his foot in the stirrup, on the point of setting out for Archester on his grey mare—the only luxury which he allowed himself.

‘I was just off,’ he said, ‘on my expedition of discovery ; for to-day is the day to tell our tale—if, unlike the Needy Knifegrinder, we have one to tell.’

‘Quite right ; I had forgotten for the moment because of an occurrence which has just happened that concerns myself more nearly. That is only human nature.’

‘It is very human,’ answered the Curate, smiling, ‘which you must allow rather corroborates my theory.’

These two had had some friendly arguments, not, indeed, of the high philosophic kind, ‘of Fate, Freewill, Foreknowledge absolute,’ but of a quasi-theological sort, in which they had very wisely agreed to differ.

‘I will acknowledge an error in logic, Mr. Dyneley, if you on your part will give me your advice upon a matter, in which I have committed no error, but the consequences of which may be serious to me. In the first place, however, I must ask you to believe that, if I am not so orthodox as could be wished, I am incapable of what is unbecoming a gentleman.’

‘I do not claim to be a great judge of character,’ answered the Curate, ‘but you may certainly take that much for granted.’

‘Thank you, Dyneley. Then this is my story,’ and thereupon he told him, without any reference to Gresham, how he had been led by a sneeze to enter the arbour, and had been found there, under ridiculous, but somewhat embarrassing circumstances, by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.



'That the man means to do me a mischief,' he concluded, 'if the opportunity should occur, I feel certain, though for the present he keeps his mouth shut.'

'I cannot conceive,' observed the Curate, thoughtfully, 'how this young woman—her name is Annabel Spruce—came to be in the arbour at all, and especially at such an hour in the morning. You have no theory, I suppose, to account for her presence there?'

Mr. Mayne had a theory to account for it, as we know, but he did not feel justified in saying anything that might implicate Gresham, so he shook his head.

'I have never seen the girl but once,' continued the Curate, 'but I have learnt from the young ladies that she is very peculiar; she does not mix with her fellow-servants, and is very reticent about herself.'

'Is she educated above her class, do you know?' inquired Mayne.

'Yes, I believe so.'

'I thought that from her manner,' replied Mayne, carelessly; he did not dare ask, what he most wanted to know, whether she could speak German.

'You ask me for advice in this matter, Mr. Mayne,' said the Curate, 'and I need not say my best services are at your disposal; but upon my word I have no action to propose. To take the initiative is dangerous, in such a case; you know the proverb, "*Qui s'excuse s'accuse*;" and since you are not only innocent of offence, but there is no accusation to the contrary, I should recommend—'

'A masterly inaction,' put in Mayne, laughing. 'Very good. I feel, however, that I have done right in consulting you, so that in case any imputation—"frivolous and vexatious," as the courts-martial call it—is made against me at any time, perhaps, in my absence, you will be in possession of the actual circumstances. In my opinion, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot is capable of anything.'

'Because he shut the garden door in your face?' said the Curate, smiling.

'Oh no; though, mind you, that was not a pleasant trait in him. He would not have dared to do it but that he felt I



could not make a row about it. Gresham knows him down to his boots, and calls him all sorts of names ; well-deserved ones, I have no doubt. To my eyes, in his influence over Sir Robert, and in his general going on in the family, he resembles tartuffe.'

'You think him a hypocrite, then?'

'Certainly ; that to begin with. It is what his hypocrisy conceals, however, that one most objects to, of course.'

'And what is that?'

'Heartlessness, nay worse, cruelty, malevolence, greed—but I fear I am shocking you.'

'It is certainly painful to me,' said the Curate slowly, 'to learn that you have so bad an opinion of the man whom Sir Robert—whom we all love and respect—delights to honour. I will confess to you at once that Mr. Walcot is not a personal favourite of mine ; but such imputations—'

'My dear Mr. Dyneley, I impute nothing,' put in the other, laughing ; 'I only give you my own opinion of the gentleman ; he may be the kindest and most disinterested creature upon earth—only if he is, I'll eat him. I am detaining you, however, from your errand.'

'Not at all. I am glad to have seen you,' said the Curate, though his tones were far from glad. He seemed almost unable to rouse himself from some unpleasant reflections. 'I shall be back by luncheon time,' he added, as he mounted his horse ; and I hope with some good news. Good morning.'

And the two young men shook hands with much cordiality.

In less than an hour after they had parted, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was in possession of the fact of their interview, which seemed to have some significance for him to judge by the manner in which he received it from the lips of Gilbert Holm.

'He comes to the Curate, does he, instead of his friend Gresham, to repose this confidence? ' was the muttered reflection. 'Now why is that, I wonder? ' He paced for some minutes the little garden before the farmhouse ere he thought this out, and even then his furrowed brow, in place of becoming clearer, grew dark as night. 'So, so, he loves her, this salt-water fool, and believes Gresham his rival ; that has sundered

friendship. So much the better ; when the faggot is unbound the sticks are snapped the easier.'

As a matter of fact, however, Walcot saw some cause for disquiet in the fact of this intimacy between Frederic Mayne and the Curate, both of whom as he well knew, were hostile to him; but like other men of strong will and self-dependent habits, he never admitted, even to himself, that matters were going against him.

In the country persons of both sexes are often fond of their own free will to drive ten miles and back to a dinner party ; the motive (for the attractions of the banquet can never account for it) is gregariousness. Their own company and that of their family has become intolerable and they put themselves to this enormous inconvenience, as Sir John Plum-pudding hung himself one morning 'for a change.' At the same time they are not unaware of the discomforts they thus incur ; the little outbreaks of temper on the road out, from hunger or other causes, the exhaustion on their return journey, and the snatch of sleep rudely broken by the jolt at their own hall steps. Therefore, neighbourly folks in the country often ask their friends to spend what (with some secret doubt perhaps, of having much means of amusement at command) they call 'a long day' with them. Mr. and Mrs. Raynes had received an invitation of this kind from Lady Arden. Perhaps it had not been given altogether with the philanthropic motives I have hinted at. The fact is her ladyship was very particular as to the social properties, and the guests in question were not quite in a position to be asked to meet the county families at dinner. Nobody knew where Mr. and Mrs. Raynes had sprung from: they had taken the only gentleman's residence there was upon Mirton Moor, about ten years ago, which in the eyes of society is but the lifespan of a mushroom ; and though county they had wonderfully adapted themselves, as it were, to the soil—Mr. Raynes was, on the one hand, very popular as an employer of labour, and, on the other, was the Rector's churchwarden at Mirton—still there was something about them that the drawing-room folks of these parts described as 'peculiar.' The gentleman quoted Shakespeare, but was quite ignorant of the usual topics of general conversation, to which he listened with

a good-natured face, that was occasionally convulsed by the most comic of grins. The boys and girls were enchanted with this peculiarity, but their elders disapproved of it, and one of them had even contemptuously nicknamed him the Cheshire cat.

His lady spoke still more seldom, but she had a beaming face which gave every one who talked to her the impression that she was entranced by their conversation, unless they happened to cross-examine her about it, when to their chagrin they found she had not understood one word of it. Of her genuine kindness of heart, however, there was no doubt, and the manner in which, though forty-seven and fat, she tripped in the children's dance always given at 'The Lilacs' at Christmas would alone have guaranteed it. 'Hung upon wires' was, indeed, an observation that had been applied to her mode of progression at all times, which, in connection with Mr. R's contortions of countenance, had caused this honest pair to be known among their intimates as 'the Marionettes.'

They were, nevertheless, of the most genuine flesh and blood, and were warmly appreciated by those who had any sense of proportion, and could forget eccentricities of conduct and appearance in the presence of real worth—among whom I need not say was Sir Robert Arden.

His greeting to them on the present occasion was only less warm than that of Frank who had been always welcome to 'The Lilacs,' and whose greatest 'chum' was their son and heir, Master Richard Raynes, at present at a boarding-school at Cheltenham. It was to that school that his own hopes had turned, as an escape from the vengeance of John Groad and Son, before they were nipped in the bud by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's veto.

The luncheon party was a large one, the great Baba having, at Mrs. Rayne's request, who doted on babies, honoured it by his august presence, and the Curate being also among the invited, though he did not join the company till they had sat down. At first the conversation, led, of course, by his Serene Diminutiveness, to whom every one listened as to a pocket oracle, turned upon the approaching Fifth of November, on which certain fireworks were to be displayed, and was, therefore, of an historical character.

The great Baba would have it that Guy Faukes (as to whom he felt he would be indebted for the entertainment in question), was by no means censurable, a position from which the whole strength of the company failed to dislodge him. Even when convinced of the heinousness of his attempt to blow up his Sovereign with gunpowder, he hazarded the idea, 'But perhaps he was a nasty King,'—which was incontrovertible.

At the moment of his triumph the Curate entered.

'This is unlike you, Dyneley,' remonstrated Sir Robert, with his usual stickling for punctuality.

'And unlike the Church,' added Gresham; 'His reverence did not know that there were oyster patties.'

'I have been over to Archester,' said the curate simply; 'and as it has turned out, on a very pleasant errand.'

'I did not know she lived at Archester,' observed George, with an involuntary glance at Elise.

But the Curate took no notice of this ribald behaviour.

'I am glad that you are all together,' he said gravely; 'and especially that Mr. and Mrs. Raynes are with you, because it is my pleasant duty to clear the character of a certain young gentleman—dear to all of us, and especially to you, Lady Arden—which has suffered under an unjust suspicion.'

Here Lady Arden's eyes began to glisten and her face to glow with pleasure; for she (and one other present) alone knew what was coming.

'You remember, Sir Robert, that a certain tale of Master Frank's about his having met a giant with six legs, on his return home from 'The Lilacs' one evening, a year or so ago, was much discredited. Now I am in a position to prove that he was really favoured with that spectacle.'

Mr. Walcot looked at his brother-in-law and smiled an incredulous smile.

'My dear Dyneley,' said Sir Robert reprovingly, 'is it not better to let bygones be bygones, than to attempt to reconcile impossibilities with truth?'

'I did see that giant,' said Frank vehemently; 'and he had six legs, just as I told you all.'

'It is quite true,' continued the Curate; 'although it would probably never have been found out but for Mr. Mayne here.'

Every one turned to the person thus indicated. It surprised them that the key to this household problem should be discovered by a comparative stranger.

'Nay, no praise is due to me,' said Mayne; 'only when I was told of Master Frank's strange experience, I thought it worth while to inquire if a giant—whether with six legs or ten—had been in these parts at all, at the time in question. From an investigation in the old files of the county newspaper in your library, Sir Robert, I found that this was the case. A caravan, with a giant in it, was located at Mirton at the date of this alleged occurrence. He was, no doubt the monster that Frank saw.'

'I don't quite see the *sequitur*,' observed Mr. Walcot, drily.

'I shall, however, have the pleasure of showing it to you,' replied the Curate, with some curtness. 'Armed with the information obtained from Mr. Mayne, I rode over to Mirton this morning, and made inquiries respecting this giant's habits. It was his custom it seems—in order doubtless that he should not be seen for nothing—to take his exercise after dark; and being, like most caravan giants, very weak in the legs, two men accompanied him, to serve as supports, when necessary on either side of him. It was thus no doubt that Frank fell in with him; and in the twilight, it was natural enough that the four legs of his companions should have seemed to the boy to belong to this Goliath as well as his own two; while his head so far overtopped the others (which, indeed, were mere props under his arms) that they escaped observation altogether.'

'I like that tory,' exclaimed the great Baba, drumming on the table with his silver fork and spoon with great enthusiasm; 'now tell Baba another about another giant, Dyney.'

But, for once in his life, an observation of the little household god passed unheeded. Everybody was crying out, 'Good boy, Franky,' and expressing their pleasure that his innocence of the imputed falsehood had been thus established.

'I told you the other day, my lad,' said Mayne,

'That ever the right comes uppermost,  
And ever is justice done.'

And here you see is an example of it.'

Frank said 'thank you,' gratefully, and as soon as he could escape from the embraces of his family took Mr. Mayne's outstretched hand ; but still he looked far otherwise than one who is enjoying a moral triumph. That notion of justice being always done to people chilled his blood. Moreover, he felt that Mr. Walcot's eye was piercing him like a bradawl.

Even when his stepfather beckoned to him and gave him a kind caress, his pale thin face wore as much pain as pleasure.

'I am afraid you have not quite forgiven us all,' said Sir Robert, 'for having done you wrong so long, Frankie.'

'Yes, yes, papa, I have,' said he, 'but I am so very——' here he was going to say 'miserable,' and the next moment would have made a clean breast of all his woes, but a glance full of warning from 'Uncle' Ferdinand stopped him short ; the unfinished sentence was kindly concluded for him by that gentleman himself.

'The poor boy means he is quite upset with everybody's kindness, Arden.'

'Good lad, good lad,' said Sir Robert, and he stroked his stepson's head with tender approval.

Curiously enough, not only he, but Lady Arden herself, was persuaded that Mr. Walcot's explanation of Frankie's tears was correct ; the scene had been certainly enough to 'upset' the nerves of any sensitive boy.

But Mr. Walcot's glance of warning had been caught by another beside him to whom it was addressed.

'The boy is afraid of him,' mused Mr. Mayne to himself. 'He has got the whip-hand of the poor child in some way, as he thinks he has of me. 'I'll take the whip out of your hand,' he muttered between lips pale with passion, 'and then if I don't lay it about your own shoulders, Ferdinand Walcot, call me a land-lubber.'

It is a mistake made by many persons of too masterful a disposition to only consider the wrongs they do in relation to those they wrong. There are natures capable of being roused to very active antagonism by tyrannies committed against others, and with which they have no sort of business.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

## SOME INDOOR GAMES.

THE afternoon was wet, so that the party at Halcombe were thrown upon its internal resources for amusement. In ordinary cases of the kind the males would have repaired to the billiard-room, and, perhaps, even enlisted a fair recruit or two ; but on the present occasion it was felt that 'Fifie' (as the girls called Frank, when in especial favour or in trouble) was deserving of especial honour ; and it was decided with the consent of the good-natured visitors that he should choose his own game, and be the Lord of Misrule until dinner-time.

For myself I love children, but I hate their games ; my knees are too stiff to take a share in their athletics ; I can't rise from the ground when at full-length 'without touching anything,' even to oblige a lady of the most fairy-like description ; as to that 'Here we go round, round, round,' the very remembrance of the exercise as practised by others gives me the vertigo ; while the notion of 'weighing sacks' is to a person of my build both dangerous and preposterous. Bad as these things are, the 'sitting down' games of children are infinitely worse ; they require a readiness of mind which has long deserted me, and an indifference to public criticism which I have not yet acquired. The propositions of the little Misses, however, are on the whole much more alarming, because more subtle and exacting, than those of their playmates of the other sex, and the party at Halcombe Hall might well congratulate itself that it had placed itself so unreservedly at least in the hands of a male.

Frank decided on 'Robber King' as the amusement for the afternoon, a choice which might, perhaps, have been appealed against by the young ladies as being somewhat of a hoydenish—not to say rompish—nature, had not the Great Baba at once expressed his approval of the idea, which was necessarily final.



'I like wobber kings,' he shouted, 'and murders and ghost-issues—tum along.'

Sir Robert, though he too liked 'playing at ghostisses' as we have reason to know, was excused on the score of indisposition; 'Uncle Ferdinand' we may be certain did not receive an invitation; and Lady Arden, protesting it was 'one of her bad days,' retired to the drawing-room sofa and the last novel of fashionable life. But the rest, even including the Curate—who was impressed (not willingly) by Mayne on the ground that it was his duty to convert the Robber King—were all included in the proscription. This game consists in all but one person going to hide, and remaining *perdu* till discovered by the King, who carries them off to durance, where they remain till rescued by some member of the party who has not been discovered, and who steals out of his hiding-place with the noble intention of releasing the captives.

The prison was a painted oriel in the great hall which threw 'warm gules' and other mellowed hues upon its tenants, who were immured behind a curtain of tapestry.

This mediæval retreat was found, singularly enough, to be generally inhabited by but one pair of victims at a time; and that pair were for the most part Mr. and Mrs. Raynes (who remained in captivity for such long intervals, that they were dubbed Baron and Barroness Trenck), and George Gresham and the German Governess.

'It is a most extraordinary thing,' observed Mayne to the Curate, who found themselves for once thus incarcerated together, 'that I have relieved Gresham and Miss Hurt from this blessed dungeon about half a dozen times.'

'So have I,' replied the other gravely.

'Then it is my opinion they get caught on purpose. Perhaps he wishes to improve himself in the German tongue.'

'Perhaps,' said the Curate; 'I always find them talking together.'

'I suppose it's quiet understood that he and Miss Nicoll are engaged to be married,' observed the other.

'It is understood so,' returned Dyneley, upon whom a crimson light had suddenly descended, though he was under a blue

pane ; 'but the engagement has never been publicly acknowledged.'

'It seems very odd, don't it.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said the Curate dryly. 'The mere fact of being found in an oriel window—or an arbour—alone with a young lady, proves nothing.'

Mr. Mayne laughed disconcertedly.

'Well, it seems to me that there's another game beside 'Robber King' being played in this house, called 'Cross Purposes'—Hush ! here's Baron Trenck ; for this relief small thanks.'

'Who would have thought of seeing you two ? I always find Mr. Gresham and Miss Hurt here.' And Mr. Raynes grinned a grin so significant, and at the same time so exquisitely comical, that the other two burst out laughing.

'Dear me,' cried Mrs. Raynes, suddenly appearing at the curtain (she was the most active of the band save the King himself, and the most devoted to the cause of the captives), 'only think of finding you three here ; and what a noise you make ! I generally release but two, and find them sitting as quiet as mice. Lor, Milly, how you frightened me ! I thought it was the Robber King.'

'Nay,' said Milly, breathlessly, her bright face aglow with exercise, and her hair streaming behind her like a comet. 'You frightened *me* ; I am not accustomed to come upon such batches of prisoners : it's like "La Force" in the French Revolution. I generally find only George and Miss Hurt, who—here is another Deliverer !'

There was indeed one and a half, for it was Evelyn with the Baba on her shoulder, whom she carried perched there with the same ease and grace with which Moorish, and other pictorial maidens, bear their pitchers to the well. This little pitcher had not only ears, but a very active tongue, and (since silence was an imperative necessity of the game) it took all Evelyn's authority to keep him still, as she flitted from room to room. She never ran, but glided, and was always stately even at topmost speed. Mayne noticed that she had none of the high spirits of her younger sister, though there was so slight a difference in years between them. Like one who takes a hand at whist to oblige

others, she did not seem to enjoy the game, though she played it very much better than the volunteers in question. Ere she could speak to the rest, the dreaded form of the Robber King withdrew the curtain, and in a voice that was meant for one of 'Murder,' cried, 'All caught.'

'Nay, sir, you are wrong,' said Evelyn. 'There are two more yet to find—Miss Hurt and George.'

'They count as one, for I always catch 'em together,' replied Frankie, and off he flashed to complete his victory.

At this speech, so corroborative of what all had been saying, or thinking, every one instantly glanced at Evy, except Mr. Dyneley, who wheeled round and stared at the painted window, as though he would have stared through it. This delicacy of conduct (as is often the case) cost the Curate dear, for if he had witnessed, like the rest, the calmness and unconcern with which Evelyn received this compromising intelligence, he would have been well assured that George Gresham, at least, was not a rival to be feared.

After this it was agreed by tacit consent that Robber King had been played out, and the more so since the Great Baba was clamorous for 'Ghostisses,' in which the game had been to his mind hitherto shamefully deficient.

So in the deepening dusk they all repaired to the library, and told terrible tales from which the Baba, in Evy's arms, snatched a fearful joy.

For my part, I dote on Ghosts, but the common sense and practical sagacity of the world have become so great that I dare not repeat these stories. One of them, however, is worth recording, first because it took the unusual course of demonstrating that inanimate as well as animate objects are subject to supernatural influences, and secondly, because it was told by the very last person in that part of the country who would have been suspected of telling stories, namely, Mr. Raynes. Moreover it had the very rarest and most valuable attribute that a ghost story can have, it was the record of a personal experience of the narrator.

'It was in the afternoon of this very month some ten years ago,' began Mr. Raynes, 'that I entered the Great Western express at Minden to go down to Exeter. I was late, and hur-

ried at the station, and in my confusion left behind me on a bench on the platform a little black bag full of papers of great importance. I had just retired from my profession——'

'What's dat?' inquired the Great Baba, who wished to have every particular explained to him, at all times, but especially regarding so important a subject as Ghostisses.

A great many people besides this intelligent infant would also have been glad to learn what Mr. Raynes' calling had been previously to his undertaking the rôle of a country gentleman, so that the question was as full of interest as of pertinence.

'When people are wise, Baba,' observed Mr. Raynes, 'and have made a little money to live upon, they proceed to enjoy themselves for the rest of their lives without working one bit more, and that is called retiring from their profession.'

This explanation, accompanied as it was by one of the most tremendous grins of which the human muscles are capable, was apparently found satisfactory by his interlocutor. So Mr. Raynes continued as follows: 'In that bag, I say, I had the title-deeds of The Lilacs, of which I had become possessed that very day; and, being in very good spirits, I was not at all in a humour to be frightened by ghosts, or anything else, until I found myself alone in the railway carriage without the bag. The instant I had taken my seat, and the train began to move, I knew that I had left it behind me, and the sense of loss was most acute and depressing. I did not reflect at the time (being quite unused to business matters) that no one could easily make use of the deeds but myself, but really felt as if I had become suddenly beggared. The change from gaiety of heart to despondency was overwhelming. Had there been any communication between guard and passenger at that epoch, which there was not, I think I should have stopped that down express for the purpose of informing its custodian that I had left a black bag at Minden station, and would be obliged to him to reverse the engine and fetch it.'

'A prey to these anxious thoughts, I happened suddenly to look up, and there, in the opposite corner of the carriage, stood the very bag before me, with a copy of the *Evening Standard* half thrust into its mouth, as I well remember to have left it. The carriage was a first-class one, and tolerably well lighted, so

that there could be no mistake about it, although five minutes before I could have taken my Bible oath that no bag was there. I verily trembled with agitation, and I must needs confess with something like superstitious fear, so confident was I both that there it was and there it had not been. I had not a doubt that it was my bag and no other, and yet it was some seconds before I could compose my mind, and assure myself how it had got there ; namely, that I had flung it there myself as I hurriedly entered, but that in the gloom of the carriage, as compared with the light from which I had come, it had escaped my observation. My mind gradually calmed down from excitement to content and gratitude, and presently I got up, walked to where the bag lay in its corner, and was about to take the newspaper out to read, when that journal was suddenly drawn down into the bag as though by some hidden hand within it, and its half-open mouth was closed in my very face with a sharp snap.

‘Anything more surprising it has never been my lot to experience, and very few things more alarming ; if it had been a black dog instead of a black bag that had thus snapped at me I should not have been half so disconcerted. I suddenly felt cowed and uncanny, as though in an unseen presence that had some connection with the bag, and as different from the proud possessor of that desirable estate, The Lilacs, as he had been half an hour ago as it is possible to conceive. It was my own bag, to all appearance, and yet it had never snapped its faithful lips at me before, or shown any external symptoms of vitality. I am ashamed to say that I left the thing where it was untouched, and without making any further attempt to establish its identity, till the train stopped at Swindon, when I stepped out with great alacrity—almost into the arms of the guard. “What is it, sir ?” inquired he, as I stared back into the carriage.

“Well, there’s a bag,” said I, not liking to say “*My bag*,” which, as it turned out, was lucky.

“Ah, yes ; I was coming for that,” said he. “There’s a sad story about that bag, or at least its owner. He had put it in this carriage, with his newspaper in it, but delayed to get in himself till after the bell rang. The train started at the same moment, and he was caught between the wheels and the plat-

form and killed on the spot. Leastways, so the telegram says. So, if one may say so, the bag belongs to a *Dead Man*."

When the audience had recovered from the shock of this recital, and were asking, according to custom, what became of Mr. Raynes' own black bag (as if *that* were the object of interest), Mr. Frederic Mayne was trying to remember under what circumstances he had heard this story before. That he *had* heard it he felt certain, and also that he had not read it. Some one had told it to him, and, what was very singular, was that after that narration some one had grinned at him, just as Mr. Raynes had done at the assembled company when he came to his conclusion. It was impossible that Mr. Raynes himself, whom he had never seen until that afternoon, could have been the previous narrator; and yet the whole thing, including the grin, seemed not so much to have been presented to his eyes as reproduced. Was it possible that in a previous state of existence the Cheshire Cat and he had met and told ghost stories to one another, and that this was one of them?

## CHAPTER XXIV.

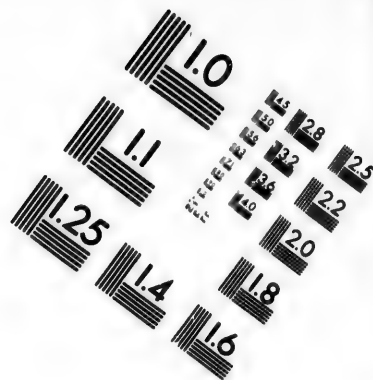
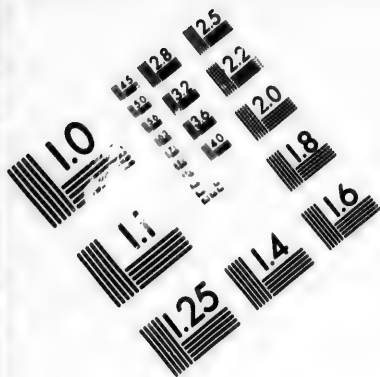
## A DANGEROUS TOPIC.

IT was no doubt that telling of ghost stories round the library fire which suggested to Frederick Mayne as a topic of conversation after dinner that evening modern Spiritual Manifestations. It was an unfortunate one in many respects, but he was quite unaware of the attraction which the subject possessed in his host's eyes, and of the reverence with which he regarded it. The family always avoided any reference to the matter, nor did they, even to their intimates, confess the hold that it had taken upon Sir Robert's imagination. They respected him too much to risk making him an object of ridicule to any person, especially in that neighbourhood, the inhabitants of which, being both old-fashioned and 'Philistine,' were not likely to receive any details of the New Gospel with much faith, or even patience. I am afraid, indeed, that public opinion in those parts, if it had expressed itself at all on such a newfangled matter, would have described the great apostles of Spiritualism as persons who wished to fill their own pockets at the expense of their disciples, a class whom in their turn they set down as one who 'from their money are soon parted.'

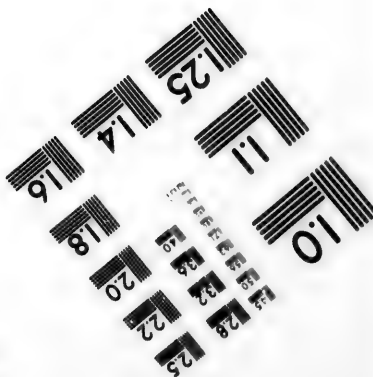
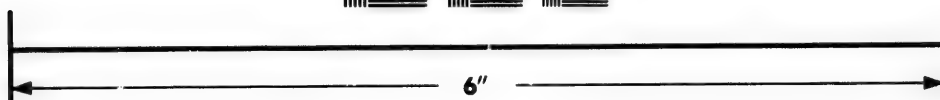
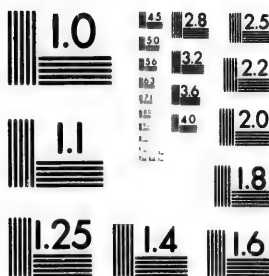
Under these circumstances it was no wonder that Sir Robert's 'peculiar' ideas were not talked about beyond the family circle; or that Gresham had not alluded to them even to his friend Mayne.

Who amongst us is so fortunate as not to have experienced once or twice in his life the terrible revelation of having unconsciously said something in a company which has produced in it a catastrophe little inferior to that of the explosion of a shell? This accidental treading on the social fuse is so calamitous to all concerned—but especially to him who has put his foot in it or on it—that I have always advocated the most stringent precautions; it would be a good plan, for example, if along





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with the *carte* at every dinner-table there was placed opposite to each guest a brief and epitomised biography of each of his two neighbours, with anything peculiar or abnormal italicised thus: '*Divorced*'—'*A pervert*'—'*An advocate of woman's rights*'—'*Madness in the family*'—'*Father hung*,' &c. Then we should know how to steer, and, at all events, to avoid the more perilous risks of conversation; to come '*stem on*,' as Mr. Mayne would have called it, right against one of them, without the possibility of '*backing*' or '*stopping*,' is a shocking circumstance; how much more terrible then is it to blunder unwillingly on some delicate topic that discomposes an entire company! This is what poor Mr. Mayne felt he had done directly he had uttered the words '*Spiritual Manifestations*.'

There was no outward sign of disturbance except that Gresham made a face as if about to whistle, but he knew by the general silence that he was on dangerous ground, as surely as though he had sunk up to his knees through the dining-room carpet.

Curiously enough Sir Robert himself seemed by no means disinclined to discuss the topic; of ridicule he stood in no fear, having never experienced its darts; while just now there were certain reasons, with which we are acquainted, that made him very willing to receive what scientific folks call '*contributions*' to the subject in question. He did not understand, as any one familiar with the world would have done, that Frederic Mayne was not the sort of person to appreciate natural phenomena, unless they came in some very distinct and material shape, such as a meteoric stone, and hit him.

'You have had some experience, Mr. Mayne, no doubt,' he said, 'with respect to this curious subject.'

'Well, yes, Sir Robert; I have been an idle man with more money than I knew what to do with, and very little judgment I fear to direct its expenditure, and among other things on which I wasted my cash was *séances*, or, in other words, small conjuring tricks done in the dark.'

'That is not the view of many eminent persons upon that subject,' observed Sir Robert gravely: 'nor, if it is worth while to say so, is it *my* view.'

'This is a free country,' replied Mayne, smiling, 'and every man has a right to his own opinion. For my part, however, I do not believe in the spirits of the Dead communicating with audiences of the Living at so much a head.'

'Perhaps you do not believe in their communicating with the Living at all?'

Mr. Mayne smiled, half-courteously, half-cynically (it was difficult with him to 'put up' with Humbug under any circumstances), and turned to his neighbour with 'What is your opinion, Mr. Raynes?'

'We have our philosophical persons,' was that gentleman's unexpected reply, 'to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors; ensconcing ourselves into knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear. Such, at least, is the opinion of the Divine William, and by him I always stick.'

'The Divine William?' exclaimed Sir Robert, interrogatively.

'W. S., of Stratford-on-Avon,' exclaimed Mr. Raynes, with a grin that would have convulsed the company had the subject on hand been a less delicate and personal one.

'I did not remember that Shakespeare took that view,' said Sir Robert, rubbing his thin hands. 'You will not deny that *he* is some authority, Mr. Mayne.'

'On mundane matters, I will grant it,' returned that gentleman; 'but he lived in a superstitious age, and must necessarily have suffered from its influences.'

'I am afraid Mr. Mayne has not much reverence for authority of any kind,' said Mr. Walcot, with a grave smile.

'I don't know what "authority" you have for that statement, Mr. Walcot,' answered Mayne, contemptuously, 'but I confess I prefer to believe in what is accompanied by proofs rather than by assertions.'

'Indeed?' said Mr. Walcot. And though he uttered but that one word, it gave Mr Mayne to understand that he (Mayne) was the very last man whom the speaker would have supposed likely to appeal to proof—after that adventure in the arbour that morning.

'If you mean by proof the personal experience of credible witnesses, Mr. Mayne,' pursued Sir Robert, speaking with great gravity; 'the subject of which we speak has ample corroboration. Without going further than this dining-room, I could find a witness to many of those manifestations to which the term "incredible" has been freely applied.'

'At the risk of being called sceptical, I should like to see them myself,' said Mr. Mayne; 'but, unfortunately, it seems I have no chance, since the presence of "sceptics" has always been found fatal to these interesting proceedings.'

'I beg your pardon,' observed Mr. Walcot, glancing at his brother-in-law, and speaking with a certain air of haughtiness; 'the presence of a sceptic is no hindrance, but that of an unsympathetic person is.'

'Unsympathetic with what?' inquired Mayne, curtly.

'With religious instincts and influences,' observed Mr. Walcot, drily; 'and especially with the appreciation of the fact that we material creatures are surrounded by spiritual beings, who have us more or less in keeping, as has been abundantly proved in these latter days by the so-called manifestations.'

'Heavenly shows,' muttered Mr. Raynes. 'That is somewhere in the Divine William's.'

'There,' said Sir Robert triumphantly. 'I had no idea you were such a student of Shakespeare, Mr. Raynes.'

'The quotation is from *Othello*,' observed the Curate, smiling; 'but it does not go to strengthen Mr. Walcot's position.'

When devils will their blackest sins put on  
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows.'

Mayne laughed aloud; Gresham (though he knew his uncle's eye was on him) could not restrain a titter; and Mr. Raynes outdid himself with a grin of the first magnitude.

'That is quite the theologian's view,' observed Mr. Walcot, contemptuously. 'They admit the facts, and even allow their supernatural character; but they set them down to the intervention of his Satanic Majesty.'

'That is not *my* view,' said the Curate, laughing; 'for putting *Didbolus* for *Deus*, I think the poet's "*nec Deus intersit*"

should settle that matter. It is surely scarce worth while for so important a personage as you have mentioned to make use of spirit-rappers.'

'You are talking about what you do not understand, Mr. Dyneley,' said Walcot, with another glance at Sir Robert, who remained silent. 'May I ask you what you understand by spirit-rappers?'

'Imposters; persons who do not hesitate, for the sake of filthy lucre, to affect communion with spirits of the departed,' said Mr. Dyneley, calmly. 'Men who take the advantage of a reverence they do not share to mislead their dupes.'

It was with astonishment that those who knew him best heard the Curate thus express himself; his tone was very earnest, and his face, which was fixed on that of his interlocutor, had a certain defiance in it: it seemed to say, 'I have been silent on this topic longer than I should have been, and now I tell you what I think of it—and of you.'

'I am sure, Dyneley,' said Sir Robert, speaking with great emotion, 'that you would not use such language as that which has just fallen from your lips, if you had given your attention to this important subject. I myself have done so, and there is another here who can claim still deeper acquaintance with it. It pains me beyond expression to——' here he stopped and turned to his brother-in-law—'I think, Ferdinand, it is only right in this company of honourable men that you should give your personal testimony to the truth.'

'As you please Arden,' answered Mr. Walcot indifferently; 'though there are minds here to-day as there were of old, of whom it may be said that neither would they believe though one rose from the dead.'

'I should,' observed Mr. Mayne, who, intent on his enemy did not notice the bright spots in Sir Robert's cheeks; 'only I must see the spectre in broad daylight, not with the shutters shut and the lights turned down, as is the modern fashion.'

'I have seen no spectres,' continued Mr. Walcot, calmly; 'but I have heard their voices, and had incontestable evidence of their presence. They have dictated words to me, too sacred, indeed, for repetition——'

Here Mayne would have laughed outright had not Gresham kicked his shins under the table.

'Words that it would be sacrilegious to expose to the ridicule of the frivolous and unthinking, but which, I hope, have made me a better and a purer man.'

'What a rascal he must have been before!' muttered Mr. Mayne beneath his breath.

'Moreover,' pursued Mr. Walcot, 'certain material experiences have occurred to me, in the presence of many and credible witnesses, which contravene what we perhaps ignorantly term 'laws of nature.' I have been carried bodily up into the air by unseen hands; you may suppose such position to be without parallel——'

'Nay,' observed Mr. Dyneley, 'there was Asmodeus.'

'Likewise,' remarked Mr. Mayne, 'a party of the name of Guppy, but that was a lady.'

It was plain that war had been declared. Gresham, out of respect for his uncle, said nothing, but it was easy to read on which side his sympathies lay. Mr. Raynes' countenance wore an air of supernatural gravity, which could not, however, be depended upon, for when this was the case he was always the more liable to facial convulsions.

'I say ignorant persons,' continued Mr. Walcot, 'may imagine such an experience to be unique, but to all who are acquainted with the records of Spiritualism there is nothing new in it. I have never been seized in this way, as some have, out of doors, but I have been carried out of the window of a room and back again through another.'

'Through glass and all?' inquired Mr. Mayne, with the air of a Miss Rosa Dartell who asks 'merely for information.'

'It was summer time, and the windows were open, sir.'

'I was afraid you might have cut yourself,' explained Mr. Mayne. 'You say you were carried by unseen hands. Now if they were unseen how did you know they were hands?'

'I felt myself balanced upon so many finger points. If you have ever played the body in the child's game of "Take breath and lift," which is merely science in sport, you will understand what I mean.



Sir Robert as though he had been recently playing the game, and had therefore the most lively recollection of it, nodded assent. It was to him that Mr. Dyneley now addressed himself, partly because he thought it his duty to protest against his infatuation, and partly because he had not the patience to discuss the matter with Mr. Walcot.

'I don't see, even now, sir, why the points should have been finger-points,' he said. 'Your brother-in-law may have associated the notion in his mind with being lifted by the hand, because things in general *are* lifted by the hand. But the theory of the unseen hands appears to me as unsubstantial as the hands themselves.'

'Mr. Dyneley has doubtless had no experience of spirit hands,' observed Walcot, carelessly; the remark appeared to be a general one, but was in reality addressed to Sir Robert.

'He certainly has not,' observed the Curate, in a tone so decisive that it seemed to convey the addition 'nor has anybody else either.'

'I have seen spirit hands myself,' observed Sir Robert, speaking with great gravity, and in accents that trembled with emotion; 'and though I have never experienced what Ferdinand has just described, I have every reason—independently of his word, which, with me, at all events, is final—to credit it.'

'No one wishes to doubt a gentleman's word, Sir Robert,' answered the Curate, gently, 'but in a personal narrative in which the narrator himself admits the facts to be contrary to the laws of Nature, it is surely permissible to suppose that he has—involuntarily—deceived himself, or has been deceived.'

'The same observation may be made on those who have described the miracles in Holy Writ,' observed Mr. Walcot.

'I must really object to place your testimony—or any man's—upon the same ground with that of inspired writers,' observed the Curate.

'I think when "tall" stories of any kind are told in the first person,' added Mr. Mayne, 'that they should be prefaced by some such observation as "I could not have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes."'

'Then you do not believe, it seems,' said Walcot, coolly, 'Sir Robert's assertion that he has seen spirit hands; you think it a "tall" story.'

'I was not referring to Sir Robert's statement, which moreover is less in altitude by a story or two, than your story. If you insist on a reply as to whether I believe that you were carried out of window on the points of unseen fingers——'

'Gentlemen,' said Sir Robert, rising with flushed face, 'I must beg that this discussion be discontinued. Let us join the ladies.'

The invitation was of course complied with; but it was not to be expected that the objectionable topic of conversation should not be revived elsewhere.

'I think,' said Mr. Raynes in a low voice to Gresham as they stood together with their backs to the drawing-room fire, 'Mr. Walcot's being carried into the air, ever so high—was just a little—eh?' and his mouth stretched into such a grin that it seemed to go all round his head.

'It was a big lie,' returned Gresham, confidentially, 'though I sincerely wish it had been true, and more.'

'How so?'

'Well, I wish the spirit hands had not only taken him into the air but forgotten to bring him back again.'

## CHAPTER XXV.

## AN AWAKENED CONSCIENCE.

THE 'intelligent reader' has, without doubt, observed that the more peculiar are our friends' opinions, the more 'touchy' they are about them; that their sensitiveness, in fact, varies in inverse proportion to the popularity of their theories. Thus one may express one's own ideas in comparative safety to a Tory or a Radical; but it is highly dangerous to venture on such a course with a Vegetarian, or a Ritualist, or a Homœopath. Always in expectation of ridicule, these good folks scent in every word the flavour of offence, and woe be to him who treads upon the tender topic. And of all susceptible gentry that adorn our planet, the believers in Spiritualism are the most thin-skinned.

Sir Robert Arden was not only a believer but a devotee. If he could not aver with a gentleman of my acquaintance that he saw as much of his wife (who had been a lady of fashion, and of whom the thing might therefore have been said without great exaggeration) since she was dead, as he had seen in her lifetime, his thoughts were more fixed upon her than even when she was alive; he held communion with her, or believed that he did so, every hour of the day, and was, in short, in spirit, a bigamist. It was quite true that he had seen her hand, or a hand that he believed to be hers, stretched out towards him from the abyss of Futurity, and even with a certain ring upon it which established its identity. And we may therefore imagine, with what annoyance, nay, with what pain and indignation, he had listened to the sceptical, and it must be confessed somewhat contemptuous, remarks of Mr. Mayne and the Curate. Gresham, indeed, had not joined them in their expressions of disbelief, but the incredulity, and something more—a pity for his own fevered fancies—that he had read in his nephew's face, had chafed him almost beyond endurance. His indignation could only, in fact

be compared with that of Rip Van Winkle, when he failed to convince those dearest and nearest to him of his own identity ; but, unlike Rip, Sir Robert had one friend at hand to appreciate his position, to understand his troubles, and to rouse his wrath against the authors of it. In the dining-room Sir Robert's sense of the duties of a host had restrained him from shewing what he felt ; and afterwards, when he had time for reflection, his kindly nature had suggested to him that, after all, it was mere ignorance that had caused these young men to err, and no intention to give offence. His sense of justice even caused him to attempt to put himself in their place, and look at the matter from their own point of view, which, however, proved a failure, for not only is it very difficult to regard the subject next one's heart *ab extra*, but also he was of course ignorant of the real reasons of the antagonism that had been exhibited in the matter : by Mayne, from his personal dislike of Walcot, and by Dyneley from the indignation he felt at seeing his host so fooled by his unscrupulous relative.

When the party had broken up, and Walcot and he repaired to the study together, as generally happened, to smoke their cigarettes before retiring for the night, Sir Robert had half resolved to pass over the affair, and if he could not forget the pain that had been inflicted on him, to ignore it. His natural courtesy, however, compelled him to utter a few words of vicarious apology.

'I am deeply grieved, Ferdinand,' he said, 'that I should have been the involuntary means to-night of putting, I do not say an insult—for I am sure it was not meant as such—but a rudeness upon you.'

Mr. Walcot smiled a deprecatory smile, and threw into his large eyes a look of interrogation.

'I mean, of course,' pursued the baronet, 'that if it had not been for my evoking your testimony, it would not have been received with such discourtesy.'

'My dear Arden, so far as I am concerned,' returned the other in a tone in which indifference and gravity were strangely mingled, 'the thing matters nothing. I am too much accustomed to the ribaldry of coarse and brutal natures for it to weigh a feather's weight with me. If I was angry—and I confess I

was deeply moved—is was upon your account, not mine. No respect was owed to *me*; but considering the position in which you stood to those three young men, the host of one of them, the patron of another, and the uncle and benefactor of the third, their contemptuous reception of a fact personally vouched for by yourself was most offensive.'

'Never mind. never mind, Ferdinand,' put in Sir Robert, quickly. 'The thing was undoubtedly not in good taste, but I shall endeavour to think no more about it. If you are ready to pass it over, it certainly does not become me to take up the cudgels on my own account,' and he waved his hand as though dismissing an unpleasant subject.

'You are above all petty feelings, I know, Arden; and your forgiveness of these persons, so far as you are concerned, does you honour. It has failed to strike you, however, that others, however willing, however disposed to forgive, may be unable to divest themselves of the consequences flowing from this outrageous conduct.'

'Others?' repeated Sir Robert, in a puzzled tone; 'eh, I see; you refer to Mr. Rayne. You think that I have suffered some humiliation in his eyes from the conduct of three young men. He seemed himself to be by no means a scoffer. Still I think I can afford to incur the commiseration of Mr. Rayne.'

And Sir Robert drew himself up with some disdain.

'I think you may, Arden,' answered Walcot, smiling gravely. 'The man is a buffoon, and intended by Nature, I believe, to grin through a horse collar. I overheard him telling Lady Arden in the drawing-room, *apropos* of Frank, that she must expect him to give her a good deal of trouble; "boys will be boys," he said, "and it does 'em good; go it while young" is my motto.'

'Go it while young,' repeated Sir Robert. 'Dear me.'

'A graceful sentiment, was it not, and gracefully expressed? No, Arden; I was not referring to Mr. Rayne, when I spoke of "others" being influenced by what was said to-night, independently of their own volition. Are you not aware that nothing is so resented by the Spiritual Nature as scoffing unrebuked? It was—I do not say your "fault," but your agency which brought about that deplorable discussion; it was you,

however involuntarily, who drew down upon the most sacred of subjects those vulgar shafts of ridicule, and it was your place—you must permit me to say—to have resented them with vigour, ay, and rigour.'

'I could not quarrel with men under my own roof, Ferdinand, for the expression of their opinions.'

'It was not, Arden, in my poor judgment,' returned the other, speaking with great gravity, 'a question of quarrel, but rather a matter calling for stern and swift rebuke; and as for the expression of opinion, surely you would be the first to repress a word of indecency or irreverence; and was it not irreverence to express an open disbelief, nay, a contemptuous scorn for an experience which you yourself have told me has formed the greatest solace of your life, and which it is your highest hope may be vouchsafed enlargement? Since you avowed that you had been privileged to see your lost Madeline's hand, was it not worth while—that fact being denied—to maintain it? Or do you flatter yourself that the spirits around us are unconscious of our moral cowardice, or unconcerned for the great truths which it is their mission to reveal?'

'Do you mean to imply, Ferdinand,' stammered Sir Robert, with intense emotion, 'that I may have involuntarily offended Madeline? Oh, you do not know her nature; moreover, if conscious, as you say, of what took place, she will also know that it was my very reverence that forbade my discussing an affair in which she herself——'

'You mistake me altogether, Arden,' interrupted the other. 'The matter—if I have any understanding of it—does not concern herself, save in our gross and mortal sense of personality, but will have reference to her spiritual nature, which has, as it were, been outraged in your presence, and with complete impunity. These matters are beyond my ken, as they are beyond that of all of us; but I fear, Arden—I greatly fear—that your communion with that departed soul has ceased for ever.'

'What?' exclaimed Sir Robert with extreme excitement; 'do you mean to say that I shall now not see her? That I have thus offended her—though I acted for the best—so as to be beyond the reach of pardon? I cannot believe it. It is not justice.'



'That is the cry of thousands, Arden,' answered the other calmly. "No one knows," says Holy Writ itself, "how oft he offendeth;" and yet if one does not know, one would think—in justice—there should be no offence. That is the argument of that cold reason which those silly disputants of to-night would fain have imagined to be on their side.'

'Never to see her!' murmured Sir Robert, plaintively; 'and now no more even to hear her, or to be conscious of her sweet presence. It is a cruel sentence, Ferdinand.'

'It is not mine, Arden. I have no authority to pronounce it; and, for aught I know, it has not been pronounced. I have only expressed my fears. It is unreasonable to reproach me.'

'I will not; I do not; I reproach myself,' said the unhappy man, striking his breast with a feeble hand. 'Oh, what is it, think you, she would have me do?'

'I know not. You will learn—if it be permitted you to do so—in due time. But if any opportunity of grace is granted you, beware, I charge you, how you place in the balance, against the wishes of the dead, any earthly considerations, such as those to which you have just now shown yourself so subservient. Men were bidden of old to give up for the true faith the very children of their loins; of you no such sacrifice can be demanded; but it may be you will have to choose, once and for ever, between the calls of this world and of the next, between convention and duty, between the living and the dead.'

'I have made my choice already, Ferdinand,' said Sir Robert solemnly.

'Therein you have done well, Arden,' returned the other, taking the other's hand impressively; 'let us hope and pray that it may not be one of those good resolves which mortals make too late. Good night, and gracious dreams.'



## CHAPTER XXVI.

## THE HEAVENLY VISION.

IT was late when Walcot bade his brother-in-law 'good night,' but Sir Robert showed no sign of retiring. He paced his room, with thoughtful face and bowed down head, for more than an hour, not with the quick tread of impatience, but with slow steps that ever and anon halted--when he would listen with attentive face to the autumn wind that swept the pane without, and to the rain that beat sullenly against it. It was at that window he had heard the mystic voice, but now there was no other sound there save the sighs and sobs of Nature. Presently he took up his bed candle, and opening a little door ascended by a spiral staircase, built in the thickness of the wall, to his dressing-room, from whence he returned in a few minutes with some sheets of writing paper in his hand. As he reopened the little door his face exhibited an intense astonishment: a pair of wax candles which he had certainly left burning on his desk when he left the room had in his absence been extinguished.

The study was a large apartment, and the light he carried with him only partially illumined it; he stood gazing into the darker part with a vague look of expectancy and alarm. Once he stepped forward as though he would have explored this shrouded space, but he altered his mind, or perhaps his courage failed him, and he relit the candles from the one he carried. When he had done so he looked quickly up, uttered a low cry, half joy, half fear, and then fell back into his chair, with his eyes fixed eagerly before him.

At the opposite end of the room, and close to the wall, stood a young woman in a gray dress, with a belt fastened by two silver eagles. She was small of stature and very slight; her complexion was dark, and her hair, which was short and curly

like a boy's, though very fine, was black as night ; but her face was very pale.

'Madeline ?'

'Yes, dearest,' returned a low and gentle voice, 'it is I.'

There was a long silence ; Sir Robert devoured her with his eyes, but seemed to be deprived alike of speech and motion, as though that one word of his had cost him half his vital powers. Presently the woman, still standing where she was, passed her hand to and fro slowly over her brow.

'It is unnecessary,' he murmured ; 'though the memory of that dear sign is sweet to me. I have no doubts—but only fears.'

'It is well,' she answered, solemnly. 'I am not as I was ; and though I never could harm you, willingly, it is perilous for you to approach me.'

'Are you happy, Madeline ?' inquired he, in trembling tones.

She bowed her head, and a gentle sigh just reached his ears and died there, 'I am not unhappy.'

'I knew it,—for it is impossible that your spirit can be otherwise than among the blessed ; but your face is sorrowful. There is something that troubles you upon another account. Can I remove that trouble ?'

'You can.'

'Is it connected with your brother Ferdinand ?'

She shook her head.

'Not with me, sweet spirit, surely ; who would spend my last breath to give you ease.'

'Yes, with you.'

Sir Robert groaned and hid his face. 'Oh, Madeline,' he murmured, 'I feared it.'

There was again silence for a time, which he was again the first to break.

'I have been looking into my soul, sweet spirit, for the records of my love for you, and they are unsullied. Still I may have wronged you unawares. Is it painful to you to tell me how, that I may amend my ways ?'

'It is not painful ; but our speech to mortals is limited. We are forbidden to say all we would.'

'Yes, yes ; I understand ; your words are precious, as indeed

I feel them to be ; each syllable a jewel, each sigh for our poor sakes, like blessed balm. Oh ! gracious spirit.'

He looked at her with a yearning devotion that drew from her another gentle sigh.

'It cannot be my second marriage that has offended you,' he went on, 'for it was your last wish that I should wed.'

The apparition smiled a sweet sad smile, and waved a deprecatory hand.

'You have never offended *me*, Robert.

'Ah, then Ferdinand was right,' he exclaimed. 'I have offended against the law of your being—and the lawgivers. I sat silent, while men blasphemed against it. I associated myself with the enemies of the Faith and of the Truth.'

The apparition bowed its head, and stood motionless with eyes closed, and chin resting upon her breast, beneath which her hands were folded. The wind and the rain had ceased, and the silence of midnight reigned in their stead.

'You are praying for me, Madeline ; you are asking forgiveness for me of the Powers I have offended,' continued Sir Robert, earnestly. 'Oh, blessed Spirit. Henceforth, I promise you, they shall have nothing to complain of. I will right them, if it be necessary, with the strong hand. No scoffer shall raise his voice in my presence without rebuke—ay, and punishment. Your sweet face is still sad, Madeline. Can I do ought to make it otherwise? Ferdinand warned me the other day to be as wax in your loving hands, if so be they should deign to mould me. But, alas, I know not how to shape myself aright.'

The apparition made no sign, but stood in precisely the same attitude, a very monument of sorrowful tenderness.

'Oh, Madeline, let me know your wishes ; do not fear the pain that they may cause me. They were always a law unto me, when you were on earth, is it likely that they should have less force with me now? There was a time when you could never think harshly of any one, or advise me to do a harsh action ; but now that you are the mouthpiece of the heavenly powers, it may be your unwilling duty to deal more sternly ; if so, I shall know how to obey you. It is true that I have formed other ties, and dear ones ; but I shall not hesitate to do your bidding, even though it snaps my heartstrings. Speak, dearest,

speak ; in what can I pleasure those who send you, or solace you ?'

She slowly disengaged one of her folded palms and pointed towards him.

' You hold in your hand, Robert, the means of doing right to the living and to the dead.'

' Ah, true ; it is my will. I brought it down to-night for final scrutiny. I had doubts and scruples, which will now be resolved for me beyond question. You will set me right, Madeline, where otherwise, perchance, through moral weakness, I might err.'

' Nay, dear one, nay,' returned the apparition ; ' it is no task for those who have shaken off their earthly burthen to deal with dross. Let your own conscience—but always having the furtherance of your spiritual faith in view—be your guide ; give no occasion for the scoffer to rejoice ; spare not, though without resentment, to chasten him.'

Sir Robert bowed his head, but his face was troubled ; even in that awful presence his gentle nature asserted itself on the side of mercy and forgiveness.

' There is enough and to spare for all,' he pleaded. ' I have made full provision for him who is near and dear to you ; I owed him much upon my own account, but it was the knowledge that Ferdinand was your brother, Madeline, which has most made him mine.'

' I ask nothing for Ferdinand,' she answered, gravely. ' Nothing, that is, for his own needs ; but it rests with you how powerful an instrument he may be made for good.'

' I understand, my darling. It shall be done as though your own hands did it. Can I do aught else to show my devotion to you—well (for she had raised a deprecatory hand)—to the good cause. I love it, I respect it, Madeline ; but my love for you—such an expression can be no disloyalty—is paramount.'

She smiled a sad but gracious smile. ' You are mortal still,' she said.

' Would that I were otherwise,' he answered gravely. ' I wear my earthly garment with impatience ; it is old and worn, and sad of hue ; when, oh ! when shall I meet you, dearest, as

spirit to spirit, without this film, which I am forbidden to pierce, between us.'

'That is beyond my ken, Robert,' was the solemn reply; 'nor if I knew it, would it be permitted me to reveal it. Something, however, I know, which it is lawful to hint of. If you would wait Heaven's good time—as is your duty—in this earthly sphere, you must leave Halcombe.'

'Indeed! what danger lurks here?'

'I said naught of danger.' For the first time the spirit's voice had something of reproach in it.

'Forgive me, Madeline; it should be, indeed, enough to receive such gracious warning, without cavil. I will go, as Ferdinand has advised me. Next to you I look to him for counsel; but to you first and foremost. When I have done all that you require of me, may I reverently hope that your presence may be again vouchsafed to my mortal eyes?'

'You may, Robert. I have been always near you, and feel myself drawn nearer, thanks to your good resolves. It is a sign that others have heard them. Listen!'

A soft gentle melody began to fill the room. The apparition lifted both her hands on high. 'My blessing rest upon you.' Sir Robert bowed his head, while the faint music grew and grew till the unseen performers seemed to be at his very side, then suddenly sank and ceased.

He looked up, and the vision had vanished.

With trembling limbs he approached the spot where it had stood, and convinced himself that it had really gone. Then he sat down at his desk, and wrote and wrote till the candles began to burn low in their sockets; ever and anon he paused, as if in doubt, or as though to catch some hoped-for sound; then with a sigh that alone broke the silence of the night, he would toil on;

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE LIGHT IN THE FARMYARD.

IF a due appreciation of one's own merits is necessary, as is generally understood, to our getting on in the world, and attaining eminence in our profession, it is certain that the Rev. John Dyneley would never have been a Bishop, nor even a Dean. And with this personal modesty he combined a tenderness for other people's feelings which is, perhaps, still more fatal to worldly success. If he did anything by accident (for it was never done on purpose) to offend or annoy a fellow-creature, the remembrance of it interfered with his appetite and even his sleep, till he had apologized or made amends. It may be imagined, then, with what feelings he returned to his lodgings at the Manor Farm on the night of that little dinner-party at the Hall, with the consciousness of having wounded the susceptibilities of one for whom he entertained a regard that was almost reverence; for that he had done so was evident enough, through all the gloss which Sir Robert, in the character of host, had courteously put upon the affair. And yet the Curate's conscience did not reproach him for the part which he had taken in the matter; it had again and again suggested to him that he should make some effort to open Sir Robert's eyes to the superstition he was known to cherish, and, if such an opportunity as had offered itself had been neglected, he felt that his silence would have been base and cowardly. His language and manner to Mr. Walcott could not, it is true, have been termed conciliatory; nor had he intended them to be so; he had fully meant them to express the scorn and contempt he felt for the man and his machinations; but unfortunately Sir Robert had regarded them as being addressed to himself.

It was a case of 'Love me, love my cur,' as Mayne phrased it; and they had both trodden rather heavily on the cur's tail.

'Whatever happens, *that* at least, is a satisfactory incident,'



the young man had argued, but without affording much comfort to the Curate.

Perhaps, beside his feelings of friendship for Sir Robert, the reflection occurred to him that the Baronet was the arbiter of Evelyn Nicoll's destinies; but, to do him justice, that was a secondary matter. His chief trouble was that in Sir Robert's eyes he must have seemed to repay his uninterrupted kindness and consideration with ingratitude. The method by which Walcot had affected to transfer the Curate's incredulity from himself to Sir Robert had been coarse and impudent, but it was clear that it had succeeded; not a word had the latter said to any one of the three young men after they left the dining-room; and, on the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Rayne, he had withdrawn to his study without so much as a 'good evening.'

It was late when Mr. Dyneley left the Hall that night, but he was in no humour for sleep; and on reaching home he exchanged his evening clothes for an out-door suit, and quickly letting himself out of doors, betook himself, as his custom was when anything troubled him, to the breezy moor for a 'constitutional.' For my part, I envy the men—and their legs—who have the power 'to walk off' annoyance as though it were a physical ailment; and there are many who can. The Rev. John Dyneley, for example, returned upon this occasion from his solitary 'stretcher' almost in a state of mental convalescence; he had persuaded himself that the thing would 'blow over,' and that Sir Robert would meet him next morning with his usual hearty greeting, as though nothing had happened.

It was morning already by the clock, though darkness and deepest night still reigned in Halcombe Valley. The villagers kept wholesome hours, and all lights, save those at the Hall, were wont to be extinguished well nigh as early as in the old curfew days. At two in the morning, therefore, the spectacle of a light moving about the rickyard of the Manor Farm, which was now revealed to the Curate's eye, partook almost of the nature of a portent. If Halcombe had been marshy he would have taken it for a Will of the Wisp, especially as its movements were intermittent; it glinted for a second, and then disappeared; and then shone again only to be hidden.



Dyneley at once concluded that it was a lantern shielded by a cloak. There was neither distress in the locality nor discontent, yet somehow the word 'incendiarism' involuntarily suggested itself to him. It was very unlikely, but not more so than that the light should be there at all ; and, as we have said, its proceedings were not those of an honest light. If aught had disturbed Gilbert Holme, and caused him to take cognizance of his property at such an hour, it would not have behaved in that erratic fashion. The young farmer might possibly have made some personal enemy, who, with the ignorance characteristic of the rustic villain, was about to wreak his vengeance on him by destroying what the Insurance Company would have to replace.

Gilbert Holme, as his lodger knew, had his faults and his weakness ; he had on more than one occasion of late seen him under the influence of liquor ; but he was a good-natured, hearty young fellow, honest as the day, so far as Dyneley knew, and certainly not one to have willingly harmed any man. Moreover he was known to be in pecuniary difficulties, and this infamous attempt—if so it should prove—to increase them, made the Curate doubly indignant. From where he stood, it was a less distance to the farm than to the rickyard, and it would have been the natural instinct of all those excellent persons whose practice it is to mind their own business, to apprise Gilbert Holme of the danger that threatened him, and leave him to take his own measures to avert it.

The Rev. John Dyneley, however, was of a disposition so *bizarre* and quaint, that he would invariably put his duty to his neighbour in the first place, and his duty to himself in the second, or even lower still in the scale of motive ; and allowing himself to be influenced by the fact that the rickyard might be in flames before he could give any warning to its proprietor, he vaulted lightly over the wall by the roadside, and dashed across the four-acre field which communicated with the spot in question. He had a stout stick and a stouter heart, and with those two things, even in these days of moral influence (and revolvers), good work can still be done.

Although the Curate ran so fleetly, he was by no means a feather weight, but the grass and scattered straw prevented his footsteps

from being heard, so that he came upon the supposed delinquent without warning. This was a man of middle height, slouched in a cloak, and he was at that very moment engaged in thrusting into the rick, by which he was stooping, a tallow candle. It was not a lighted candle; but, as the new comer at once perceived, was presently to form the nucleus of the conflagration, and keep it going, if the materials of the rick itself should not prove sufficiently combustible.

The Curate also noticed with a grim smile (for he could now afford to smile, since he had arrived in time) that the incendiary had so contrived matters that the ricks only should be burned, and the dwelling-house spared, perhaps out of consideration for the Curate's own possessions, since one so malignant was very unlikely to have taken pains to spare his enemy.

Dyneley stood over the stooping man, with his cudgel sloped over his shoulder, ready to strike if it should be necessary. There was plenty of time had he wished to take him at a disadvantage, for the fellow was a bungler at his evil work; the Curate noticed, moreover, that his hand shook—whether with guilt, or fear, or some physical ailment—as he strove to open the door of the lantern, and when he did so, the wind blew out the light. He had, however, a box of matches, and having struck one, had relit the wick, and was twisting up a piece of paper wherewith to set fire to the straw, when Dyneley laid his hand upon his shoulder.

The man sprang up, and was about to fall furiously upon him when he recognized the face of the Curate, and threw up his hands with a piercing cry.

'Gilbert Holme, what are you doing here?' inquired the other, slowly.

At this the young farmer strove to recover himself. 'That is a pretty question,' he said, with a thin laugh, 'to ask of a man in his own farmyard. If you must know, Mr. Dyneley, I thought there were some queer people about the house—but it turns out that it was only you.'

'When you were touched, why did you cry out "My God!"'

'Because you startled me so.'

'No, that was not the reason. It was because you felt the eye of Man was on your crime. Poor fool! as though God

could not see you without my standing by. You were going to burn down the ricks.'

'What, my own ricks? You have called me a fool, but that would be a fool's trick, indeed.'

'If that was not your intention, why did you thrust that tallow candle in yonder, and for what were you lighting that piece of paper?'

It would have puzzled Machiavelli, or a London thief, to have explained this circumstance upon the instant. Mr. Gilbert Holme fell back upon the laws of property, and the freedom of the subject.

'I suppose a man can do what he likes on his own land, with his own wheat.'

'What, burn his ricks down when they are insured? Do not bandy words with me, sir. I don't know what your motive was, except that it was a bad one; but I know that you meditated a crime.'

'Heaven have mercy upon me,' cried the wretched man, suddenly falling upon his knees, and hiding his face in his hands, from which the other had snatched the lantern. He was trembling in every limb, and had burst into tears; partly because he was really sorry for what he had done, and partly because the stimulus of the brandy he had taken to prime himself for his evil act, had evaporated. Of this last fact the Curate was unaware, and touched with his penitence and affright, he said, 'Heaven has already been merciful to you, Gilbert Holme, since it has moved me to keep silence about this night's work. Rise up, and follow me within doors.'

This the other did, like a dog, not only in the way of obedience, but in a certain dumb confidence in the other's leading which his manner exhibited.

'You are very good to me, Mr. Dyneley,' he said, 'and I am not worthy of it. I have earned no service at your hands; on the contrary, I have done all I could to harm you.'

'To harm me?' answered the Curate, in surprise, 'I cannot think that.'

'No; nor would any one else, since you have always stood my friend. But oh, Mr. Dyneley, I was in the Devil's hands.'

'You were some minutes ago, no doubt,' answered the other cheerily, 'but let us hope you have escaped from them.'

'No, no, I don't mean *him*, but another, and a worse one. He that set me against you (though I did not wish it), and put me as a spy upon you, and told me to pick up all that I could to your discredit in the village, and that if I could find nothing, it would be the worse for me.'

'Gilbert Holme,' said the Curate, gravely, 'you have been drinking; if you do not give that up you are a lost man.'

'Drinking?—Yes,' returned the wretched man, with a certain passionate desperation. 'You would drink if you had become, body and soul, the slave of a villain. I did wrong, or I should never have put myself in his power, but my punishment is greater than is just, greater than I can bear.'

They had now reached the Curate's parlour, and he had lit a candle, and stood regarding his late companion with incredulous amazement. 'Here, take a glass of water, man; it will clear your brain,' he presently said; 'then sit down, and tell me all, if you really have anything to tell, and are not stark, staring mad.'

'Mad? It is, you may well say, a wonder that I am not mad, seeing what I have gone through, since—since the day I tried to cheat Sir Robert; and after all it was but a matter of a few trusses of hay.'

'You only tried then?'

'Well, no, sir, I did cheat him, but not for ten times the value,' answered the other, *naïvely*, 'if I had but known, would I have fallen into that villain's hands.'

'You mean Mr. Walcot? He found you out then?'

'Yes, and he will find out that I have told you so; and then life will not be worth living any longer.'

'Never mind Mr. Walcot,' said the Curate, encouragingly, 'tell me all exactly as it happened, and I promise you, it shall be none the worse for you. Only it must be the truth.'

'Well, sir, I had lost money—no matter how, it had to be paid—and I had a bill to meet. And I sold the Squire a rick and a half of hay for two ricks. That was the one dishonest thing I ever did in my life, though that devil laughed and

sneered at me for saying so ; but there, I might as well have pleaded to a millstone.'

'You say *one* dishonest thing, Gilbert ; what then do you call what you were going to do to-night ?'

'Well, that was dishonest, too, sir, but then, thanks to you, I didn't do it. The fact is, I had another bill to meet next month—and a pretty big one. And if I sold my ricks I should have lost money, and what is worse just now, my credit, too ; whereas the insurance company—which is as rich as rich—'

'I see,' interrupted the other, drily. 'You need not make bad worse by defending it with rotten arguments. Let us leave the rick question—though it is a most serious one—and confine ourselves to the crime you have actually committed. I may not feel called upon to take any steps against you in the one case, but it was Mr. Walcot's bounden duty to do so in the other.'

'Yes, but what steps ? He makes a slave of me for his own purposes. And don't suppose that it is necessary to do anything wrong to cause him to grind one ; why, there's poor Master Frank—'

'Ah, what about him !' put in the Curate, sharply, for the other had stopped suddenly, and looked over his shoulder, with a frightened air.

'Well, sir, I will tell you although he murders me for it ; for, mind you, he will find it out as he does everything. He is everywhere and can hear and see, like the old one himself, just when one thinks one is most secure. Master Frank, I say, who never hurt a human being, nor yet an animal, nor did any wrong as far as I know, is as much in Walcot's hands as I am. The poor child thinks he can send him to gaol for murder—though young Jim Groad is alive and well, and only rolled into the mill stream because the bridge was slippery. I saw it all with my own eyes ; only that devil says, "You shut your mouth, and let me deal with this matter my own way." And his way is with old Groad's assistance to keep that poor boy in a state of wretchedness from morning to night, for fear of his being punished for a crime that has never been committed. When I think of my being a party to that wickedness—and look at Master Frankie's hollow cheeks—'

'It is incredible, it is impossible,' interrupted the Curate, opening and shutting his hands, as he walked hastily to and fro. 'This man must be a devil.'

'No, sir, he is *the* Devil,' replied his companion. 'The Other One is not to be named in the same breath of sulphur.'

'But how could the gardener be induced to join such an abominable scene.'

'Oh, Groat; well he is not a sweet thing in gardeners himself, sir; and it is very likely that Mr. Walcot has got him in some vice or another, like myself, and has only to turn a screw.'

'What on earth can be his motive for such villany?' murmured Dyneley, half aloud.

'Motive, sir! Why what is the Other One's motive, if you come to that? Why he likes to get people into his power, and make them miserable, of course; and the better people are, and the higher they are out of his reach, the more he hates them—that is why he detests *you*, Mr. Dyneley.'

'I will consider that a compliment then,' said the Curate, drily, 'and owe him no grudge upon my own account. But this matter of Master Frank's must be looked to, and that at once. Now do you go to bed, Gilbert, and leave me to think out how it had best be done; and rest secure that you shall come to no harm for what you have done or said to-night.'

'Oh, Mr. Dyneley, how shall I ever repay you, for your kindness—and your mercy!' cried the young farmer. 'I feel as if a load were taken off my chest already; I can breathe *free*!'

'Well, if you think you owe me anything, Gilbert, the way to please me best will be to forsake your greatest enemy.'

'Forsake him, sir! I would give him up to the hangman to-morrow: and if there was no one else to do it, would volunteer to pull his legs.'

'It is not Mr. Walcot, who is your greatest enemy, Gilbert,' returned the Curate, gravely; 'it is the spirit flask.'

'I'll never touch it again, sir, so help me——.'

'Make no rash promises,' interrupted the Curate, solemnly. 'A good resolve quietly worked out is worth all the vows to which men call Heaven to witness. Good night, and God be with you.'



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## A CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK.

THERE were but a few hours of darkness left to the Curate when he found himself alone in his parlour, and those he did not give up to their rightful claimant, Rest. The events of the preceding evening, joined to those of the night, afforded him topics of thought, too important and exacting to admit of his taking repose. He sat with his elbows on his desk, and head in his hands endeavouring to think what was best to be done for the rescue of poor Frank, for the enfranchisement of Sir Robert from Walcot's evil influence, and in short for the whole state of Halcombe, groaning in secret, under a despotic and cruel tyrant. As the Curate of the parish, he had, it was clear to him, authority to resist oppression, and to expose deceit, but his relations with the tenants of the Hall were somewhat delicate, and the antagonism in which he had involuntarily placed himself to his late host necessarily increased the difficulties of his position. The devotion of the Baronet to Spiritualism was of no recent growth; but, though the members of his family knew and deplored it, they had not hitherto suspected the hold it had taken of his very heart-strings. Something of this, however, from the unwonted displeasure he had displayed on the previous evening, Dyneley now guessed, and partly understood, too, what a fulcrum this superstition of Sir Robert's would afford to him who was the High Priest of it, whereby to turn his devotee to his own ends. There was no juster man alive than Robert Dyneley, but he had prudence withal; and while burning to avenge the wrongs of the innocent, he did not forget to estimate what it might cost him to attempt it. The shortest and surest method of securing an ally, and a powerful one, was to tell all to Lady Arden, whose sympathies would be at once enlisted on behalf of her son; but the Curate's knowledge of the influence exercised over the



Baronet by Walcot made him reject this line of conduct; its effect would certainly be to place her in direct antagonism to her husband and his powerful friend; and it might well happen that the latter would prove too strong for her. From Gresham again he would be sure of sympathy, but the relations between that young man and Sir Robert were even now anything but satisfactory, thanks mainly to Walcot, who, the Curate was now persuaded would stick at nothing to put him out of what little of his uncle's favour was still left to him, even to the destruction of his future prospects. The whole family at the Hall, indeed, might be most materially injured, if, after a battle royal, the victory should remain with this wily scoundrel, whose aims no man could fathom, though it was certain they were grasping and self-seeking.

Under these circumstances Dyneley resolved to consult Frederic Mayne, a man on whose good impulses he could rely, and who had himself nothing to lose by any act of hostility to the common enemy. Accordingly, as he knew that gentleman's habit of early rising, he swallowed a hasty breakfast, and betook himself to the Hall, which he opportunely reached as the ex-sailor was about to set forth on his usual morning ramble. The two young men greeted one another cordially, and as they walked together towards the church upon the hill, Mayne at once expressed his apprehensions that in hitting out at 'that scoundrel Walcot,' last night they had both committed themselves in the eyes of their host. 'For the first time since I've been in the house, Dyneley, Sir Robert forgot (I am afraid on purpose) to wish me his customary goodnight.'

'Very likely,' observed the Curate, gravely, 'and you may think yourself lucky if he doesn't wish you "Good-bye?"'

'What? You don't mean to say he would turn me out of the house,' answered Mayne, reddening, 'just because I didn't believe in that beggar's being carried into the air? I should as soon believe in his going to Heaven!'

The Curate shook his head. 'Sir Robert regards his brother-in-law's honour as his own,' he said.

'Then he is the most modest man I know,' observed the other.

'He is modest, my dear sir ; diffident of himself to the last degree, but having the utmost confidence in others—unhappily, whether they are worthy of it or not, as in 'this particular instance. In addition to his misplaced affection for his brother-in-law there is this bond of spiritualism between them.'

'Bond of fiddlesticks,' ejaculated the sailor. 'You don't suppose that the Mawworm—Walcot—believes in anything, human or divine, except himself?'

'Very likely not ; but unfortunately Sir Robert believes in *him* implicitly. In listening to what I have to tell you, pray keep this in mind, and do not imagine, however plainly the right may be on one side, or however capable of proof, that it will be an easy thing to establish it against this person's wishes. I shall ask your advice, and perhaps even your assistance, but I must exact a promise from you beforehand that you will take no steps in the matter I am about to disclose without my concurrence. If your interests or mine were alone concerned, our course would be plain enough, but we have those of others—dear to both of us, I am sure—to consider, and they must not be imperilled.'

Mr. Mayne's face grew longer and longer during this exordium, and his air more grave ; an effect it was, perhaps the other's intention to produce, for he knew by this time his companion's impulsive and hasty disposition.

'All right, Dyneley,' was the quiet rejoinder ; 'only just let me say one thing before you begin, out of respect for my own intelligence, and also because it's an immense satisfaction to alter it—that nothing, *nothing* you can tell me with respect to the goings on of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot will astonish me, or come up to the very high opinion I have formed of his lying, meanness, selfishness, impudence, and general rascality. Thank you. Now go on.'

In spite of this ample assurance of his knowledge of Mr. Walcot's character, and of the immobility of his own feelings under any amount of revelation of it, long before the Curate had reached the end of his statement—which comprehended all that he had learnt from the lips of Gilbert Holme—Mr. Mayne began to exhibit signs of great excitement. Especially did he indulge in pulling down his shirt cuffs to the fullest ex-

tent—an action termed in fashionable circles ‘shooting his linen,’ in doubling his fists, and squaring up at an imaginary foe, and in drawing deep breaths through his closed teeth, instead of through the usual channels. ‘It is horrible,’ he ejaculated, when all was told—‘most horrible! To torture a delicate lad like Frankie—a mere child—why this brute must be a fiend. Oh for one quarter of an hour—or even ten minutes—along with him, on a green sward, like this out of the reach of the police. His own mother shouldn’t know him—but there, he could never have *had* a mother. I know I have promised to do nothing without your concurrence but my dear Dyneley, you can’t object to just ten minutes,—only ten.’

There was such an alarming eagerness for action on the speaker’s face that the Curate laid his strong hand upon his arm, and clutched it lest he should start off then and there, and ‘interview’ Mr. Ferdinand Walcot in the manner indicated, before morning prayers.

‘You must do nothing, Mayne,’ he said, ‘*nothing* that can tend to excite Sir Robert against us, or rather against those it is our aim to protect.’

‘Do you really think it *would* excite him?’ pleaded the other comically. ‘I am quite sure Walcot would not have a word of complaint to make—not for a week to come at least. He should not have a tooth in his mouth, nor a breath in his body. Only ten minutes, Dyneley!’

‘Be quiet, be reasonable, my dear fellow,’ answered the Curate, earnestly, ‘or I shall regret having told you anything. Don’t suppose I don’t feel the same as you do, because I’m a clergyman; why, when I think of Frankie’s little face, all furrowed by tears, as I have seen it lately, and then on that hypocrite’s self-satisfied smug features I could’—here he paused, allowing himself, it was evident by the gleam of his eyes to dwell for a fleeting instant upon some picture of retribution—‘yes, I could find some carnal satisfaction myself in having it out with him. But we must not think of our personal gratification in this matter,’ he added naively; ‘we must first and foremost get the wrong righted, then afterwards if it can be done (which is, however, more than doubtful) we may think of

punishing the wrongdoer. In the first place, we must get Groad the elder to acknowledge his participation in this infamous affair. Before going into court we must make certain of our witnesses.'

'Let us see the rascal at once,' said Mayne impetuously.

'Well, that is where I want your assistance. Groad and I are not on good terms. He does not now come to church on the plea of being a Presbyterian, upon which point I have not a word to say; only I have reason to know that he spends his kirk-time in whisky drinking, and on that I did venture to put in a remonstrance which he has resented. A visit to him from me would at once arouse his antagonism, whereas you will at least start fair with him.'

'I see,' answered the other, assentingly, as a matter of fact he did not see that it was at all necessary to start 'fair' with the personage in question, but, on the contrary, was quite resolved to take every advantage of such a scoundrel chance might offer. His conviction was that the Curate was much too scrupulous in his mode of combating the antagonists they had to deal with, and he was secretly well pleased with this opportunity of treating one of them, at least, in his own fashion. It was well understood by both Dyneley and himself that there was no time to lose, since should the common enemy be forewarned of what was going on, he would be forearmed indeed, and Mayne at once repaired to the gardener's cottage.

As the family at the Hall were at that hour supposed to be still in their beds, or at family prayers (which Mr. Groad's scruples, of course, prevented him from attending) that personage would have considered it a positive waste of time (since there was nobody to look at him) to be pursuing his avocation in the garden; and the visitor found him accordingly seated in an armchair in his parlour, smoking a short pipe, and watching with a philosophic air his black parrot as it swung itself on the perch in its metal cage.

'Good morning, Groad,' said Mayne, in a loud voice, for the gardener was notoriously hard of hearing; nay, it was even said by some that he was stone deaf, when anything was said (such as complaints of his inefficiency) that he did not wish to hear.

'Mornin', sir,' answered the gardener, in less gruff tones than usual, and rising from his chair, by no means out of courtesy, but to suggest the idea that having now thoroughly thought out some scheme of cultivation of his master's territory, he was about to put it into practice.

'We are all for ourselves, here,' croaked the Parrot, rather inopportunistly for the impression Mr. Groad wished to produce.

'A wholesome sentiment charmingly expressed,' observed Mr. Mayne; 'for if we don't look after ourselves who will look after us, eh, Poll?'

There was something in the visitor's look and tone (though the latter was gay enough) which Mr. Groad did not seem to like; he put on his cap and took up a shovel.

'Well, I've got my green-hus fire to look after,' he said. 'Poor folks can't afford to waste their time in chatter like rich ones—and parrots.'

'You speak like a proverb, Mr. Groad. Do you believe in proverbs?'

'I dunno as I do, and I dunno as I don't.'

'A prudent reply. Perhaps my question was a little too general. Do you believe that Honesty is the best Policy?'

The gardener's well-tanned cheek turned to a deeper shade. 'You had better ask the Minister,' answered he contemptuously, and moved towards the door.

'I *have* asked the Minister, and I have come from him to you,' replied the other, regarding him attentively; 'he is a kind man, and pities you from the bottom of his heart.'

'It's my belief you take your whusky before breakfast,' growled Mr. Groad; but although his voice was gruff, the other noticed that his eyes showed much disquiet.

'Well, if I do, it's only what *you* do, my good fellow.'

'Not a drop has passed my lips this blessed morn,' ejaculated the gardener, solemnly.

'Then you keep it in your mouth all night, and that's what makes you smell of it so confoundedly,' was Mayne's unexpected rejoinder. 'Now, look here, don't put yourself in a passion; a religious man like you should never give way to temper, especially in such a time of affliction. Think of your poor murdered bairn.'

'The man's mad,' muttered the gardener, grasping his shovel.

'But you *have* lost poor Jem, have you not?' pursued the other, earnestly.

'Not as I knows on.'

'Well anyhow you very nearly lost him; he was half-drowned in the mill-stream, was he not?'

'I'm off to the green'us,' said Mr. Groad, evasively. The subject that had been so unexpectedly broached had been strictly tabooed to him, by Mr. Walcot's orders, so he took refuge in his physical infirmity.

Mayne quietly placed himself between his companion and the door.

'Then your Jem lied, did he, when he said that Master Frank had pushed him in?'

'We are all for ourselves here,' said the Parrot.

'Quite right, Poll. A lie is nothing,' continued Mayne, airily, 'but a lie that is made up between two persons—such as a father and his son—to accuse another wrongfully, is in the eye of the law a conspiracy. The punishment for that is Penal Servitude. Look here, John Groad, you be careful; don't you say anything that may get you into trouble.'

The speaker had exactly hit the difficulty that was agitating Mr. Groad's brain, and this expression of solicitude for his welfare shot to the very core of it. He knew that some such phrase was used to prisoners when they were taken into custody, and in his guilty mind he already felt the handcuffs about his wrists. The charge he had made against poor Frankie he had committed to writing under Mr. Walcot's orders, and now, as it seemed to him, that gentlemen had turned round upon him, and was about to sacrifice him to justice.

'I can't hear a word you say,' murmured Mr. Groad, with a face, however, that much belied his word.

'That's a pity,' observed his companion, drily. 'It is not necessary, however, to *hear* the judge—when he gives you 'seven years.' The sentence has just the same effect in writing.'

At this moment the door opened and in came Jem Groad, with an armful of potatoes. His cunning eyes roved from his father to his visitor, with an air of much suspicion and alarm.



'Go to your bedroom, lad, till I call you.' growled the gardener, angrily.

'Not so fast,' cried Mayne, seizing the boy by the arm; 'it is only fair that Jem should have his chance of escaping prison walls, and dry bread, and whipping. If he still sticks to it that Master Frank pushed him in, well and good; the judge will decidé it; but if he makes a clean breast of it there will be no disposition on the part of the prosecution to press hard upon him.'

'He didn't do it,' cried Jem, suddenly dropping the potatoes and falling on his knees; 'I slipped off the bridge of myself, and nobody didn't push me. Only father and Mr. Walcot—they made me say as 'twas Master Frank.'

There was a long silence, which the parrot was first to break with his monotonous cry, 'We are all for ourselves here.'

At this repetition of what it was now but too evident was the family motto, the old gentleman muttered a sullen imprecation. 'The boy's a liar when he says that I had anything to do with it. It was Muster Walcot's business—not mine, nor Jem's—from first to last. Of course if he now thinks different, well and good, so far as I'm concerned; but I am not a-going to be made a scapegoat of.'

There was a certain smothered indignation about the old man's tones which did not escape his visitor's keen ear.

'If you rely upon Mr. Walcot to get you out of this,' he said, 'you are trusting to a reed, and a rotten one.'

'You don't mean to say as he's been and rounded on me?' cried the old man, passionately.

Here was a difficulty, which also involved a nice point in morals. Mayne could hardly say Walcot had betrayed him, and yet if he answered 'No,' the man might prefer to stick to his patron and his story. He took a middle course.

'Does Mr. Walcot look to you, Mr. Groad, like one who, being himself in danger, never peaches.'

'Did he tell about *them*?' interrupted the other, with his hand to his ear, and speaking with great vehemence. 'Has he told Sir Robert about the peaches.'

Mr. Mayne nodded.

'Then I've done with him,' cried the old man, bitterly.



'He took his oath as he'd never tell if I only served him. There was only ten dozen of 'em, as he saw himself, Master Mayne; and they was the first I ever sent to Covent Garden.'

'That is as it may be, Mr. Groad,' replied Mayne coldly; 'but I think I may promise that no steps will be taken to your detriment, if only you tell the truth, as Jem has done, about the matter of Master Frank. In the mean time keep a quiet tongue in your head, and if Mr. Walcot comes here, be careful not to let him know I've been before him, or that any one knows, beside you two, of your having taken too much upon yourself in the way of perquisites.'

'Yes, sir, yes, that was it,' cried the gardener, clasping his hands; 'it was just overstepping my rights, though that villain Walcot called it thieving. I'll be thankful, indeed, if you'll say a good word for me. As for him, I will do what you like that may do him an ill turn.'

'And I'll say what I know,' said Jem, with clumsy fervour; 'and more, too, sooner than go to prison.'

'Quite right,' said Mr. Mayne approvingly. 'You are a chip of the old block, you are, Jem. Good morning.'

'Good morning, sir,' echoed father and son in servile key.

'We are all for ourselves here,' chimed in the parrot.

bitterly.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## CHECK AND COUNTERCHECK.

BY noon that day with such goodwill did Mr. Frederic Mayne pursue his part in what he subsequently spoke of as the Great Rebellion, that he had obtained Mr. Groad's signature to a brief narrative describing the plot he had entered into against Master Frank Nicoll's peace of mind, at Mr. Walcot's suggestion, and acknowledging its falsehood. To this Gilbert Holm had also added in writing his corroborative evidence, in stating which his remarks upon the arch conspirator did not certainly err upon the side of leniency. The document, on the whole, as it seemed both to Mayne and Dyneley, was proof sufficient to carry conviction to any mind—however warped and prejudiced—and with it the strongest loathing and disgust for the offender. It was, in short, a bill of indictment against one Ferdinand Walcot, setting forth his gross abuse of the powers entrusted to him, as the administrator of Sir Robert's affairs, in the suborning of witnesses, whose own misdeeds against his employer he had condoned on condition of their becoming his instruments. The object, too, of this base conspiracy being an innocent child, left nothing to be desired for raising the flame of honest indignation in any breast—far less in that of one so kind and just as the judge to whom they were about to make appeal. Had the two young men entertained the least doubt of the result, they would, having thus got up the case, like a firm of attorneys (except that they worked for nothing), have placed it in the hands of Lady Arden herself as their counsel and advocate. But it was their object to spare her all the pain and distress of mind they could, and it was their hope and natural expectation that by the time she came to know of the cruelty and wrong practised on her little son, the chief delinquent would have been dismissed her roof with ignominy. So it was arranged that one or both of them should seek an interview with Sir

Robert without informing any one else—not excepting even George Gresham—of their intentions. They judged that the less the members of the family at the Hall were mixed up with so grave an accusation, the less poignantly Sir Robert would feel the exposure of his brother-in-law, and they especially wished that he should not associate them in his mind in days to come with a proceeding, which, however necessary, must needs be most unwelcome to him. In the end, and for this same reason as regarded the Curate, Mayne persuaded the former to place the whole affair in his own hands, which being thus brought under Sir Robert's notice by a comparative stranger, should be rendered as little unpalatable to him as was possible.

It had become not unusual of late for the Master of the Hall to absent himself from the rest of the family till late in the day ; he took his morning meal in his study, to which, as we have said, there was an access from his dressing-room, and left his *alter ego*, Mr. Walcot, to represent him in matters not only temporal but spiritual—that is to say, at family prayers. It had happened so upon the day after the little dinner party, nor did he put in an appearance, as was his wont, even at luncheon. Lady Arden had explained that her husband was indisposed, but seemed disinclined to enter into further particulars. His manner, though still kind, had indeed been more *distract* to her than ever that morning, while his wan and haggard air had for the first time given her real cause for anxiety. He had dropped a hint, too, of the probability of his going abroad for a few months for the benefit of his health, and when she had offered to accompany him he declined, though with an ample acknowledgment of the self-sacrifice on her part which such a proposal had involved. What annoyed her was that, by way of allaying her anxiety, he had said something of the safe hands in which he would find himself, as though his intended companion, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, had been little short of all in all to him.

'Is Sir Robert well enough this afternoon, Lady Arden, to admit of my having a few words with him,' Mayne had asked, unconscious of this rift in the domestic lute. And her ladyship had replied, with a touch of tartness, 'I really can't say Mr.

Mayne ; you had better apply to Mr. Walcot, who has been closeted with him all the morning.'

Here was tinder, Mayne saw at once, if he only chose to apply a spark—one hint of what he had got written down on the paper in his breast-pocket—but mindful of the Curate's warning, he took no advantage of the opportunity. To ask for Mr. Walcot's good offices in the matter was under the circumstances out of the question, so he wrote a few lines to Sir Robert, asking permission to speak with him in private upon an important matter, and gave them to Parker the butler.

That dignitary returned in a few minutes with word that his master would see Mr. Mayne, and at once ushered him into the study, where Sir Robert sat at his desk, with Walcot standing by his side.

It was not a pleasant errand for Mr. Mayne under any circumstances, to beard, as it were, the lion in his den, but it was ten times more embarrassing thus to find his jackal in immediate attendance on him.

Sir Robert rose, and bowed with a cold smile, but without taking the hand that his visitor stretched out to him.

'I regret to hear that you are unwell, sir,' said the latter, firmly : 'I should not have intruded on you at such a time, if what I wished to say to you was not of great importance.'

'I am quite well enough, Mr. Mayne, to hear anything you may have to say to me,' was the frigid response.

'My communication, however, is of a strictly private nature,' returned Mayne, with a significant glance at Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, who returned it with a half-indifferent, half-amused air, which incensed the other exceedingly. It seemed to say, 'I don't know what you are come about, my young friend, but you had much better save your breath to cool your porridge, or for some other purpose of utility. It is no use wasting it against me.'

'I have no secrets from Ferdinand Walcot,' observed Sir Robert, laying his hand upon his brother-in-law's wrist affectionately.

'He has, however, some secret of his own which he takes care to keep from you,' replied Mayne, boldly. 'I tell him to

his face, and in your presence, that he has deceived and tricked you.'

Sir Robert would have risen from his seat, but for the heavy hand that Walcot placed upon his shoulder, while at the same time he whispered something in his ear. As it was the baronet regarded his guest with looks not of incredulity, for their significance was far beyond that—but of amazement and indignation.

'Here are the proofs of what I say in writing,' continued Mayne, 'signed by the persons used by Mr. Walcot as his tools, namely, John Groad and Gilbert Holm. With their assistance, secured by his knowledge of certain dishonest acts committed against yourself, and dishonestly concealed by him from you—Yes, sir you may read it with your own eyes'—for Sir Robert held out a trembling hand for the document—'how, while he has used the guilty for his own ends, he has not hesitated to sacrifice youth and innocence.' There was a sharp tearing sound, and the paper was rent asunder, as he spoke, and cast by Sir Robert contemptuously upon the floor.

'It will take far more, sir, than the testimony of two such men as you have named, with your own to boot," cried he, indignantly, 'to make me think one thought that has disgrace or deceit in it regarding Ferdinand Walcot. He is above the reach of calumny, nor will I insult him so far as to read what slander may have designed against him.'

'To be thus wilfully deaf and blind, Sir Robert,' urged Mayne, earnestly, but not without a touch of pity as he caught the look of misplaced tenderness and confidence the other had bestowed on his companion, 'is to belie your nature, which is honest and just and kind. Do not let that man there warp it. At least investigate this matter with fairness, as though it concerned another, not yourself.'

'If it concerned another, sir,' answered the Baronet haughtily, 'it is possible, though even then I should not stoop to notice it, that I might bid you take it to some other judge, but since, according to your own showing, it only concerns me and mine, I should scorn myself were I to pay any, the least, regard to it. My only hope, as regards yourself, sir, is that in making so infamous a charge you have been made the catpaw by some more

designing person, whose name, however, I will not ask you to disclose. Tell him only this from me, that in traducing my dear friend and relative, he is doing *him* no disservice in my eyes, but only making himself contemptible and disgraced in them.'

'I do not know to whom you allude, sir,' replied Mayne, gravely. 'I came here of my own free will, and solely out of the love of justice implanted in every honest man. Is it possible that you refuse to listen to me, or to ask a single question which may elicit right from wrong?'

For a moment Sir Robert hesitated; this appeal to his natural sense of justice was not without its force; as he was about to reply Mr. Walcot whispered a few words into his ear.

'True, true,' he replied. 'Since it seems you are so anxious to be interrogated, Mr. Mayne, may I ask you, leaving this mighty accusation where it lies' (and he pointed contemptuously to the ground) 'whether it is true that you are abetting my friend and nephew, George Gresham, in his courtship of Miss Elise Hurt, being yourself as well aware as I am that his word is pledged to my niece Evelyn.'

'Indeed, sir, I cannot see,' returned Mayne, with a faint smile, for he felt the importance of the admission sought to be extorted from him, 'how it is possible that I can abet my friend in any such enterprise.'

'Ha, then you own, at least, that he meditates it,' put in Sir Robert, quickly. 'Come you are in love with truth and right it seems; answer this question fairly, does George woo this girl, my nieces' governess—or not?'

'I do not think it necessary, Arden, to ask that question observed Walcot, speaking aloud for the first time. 'You have only to read the gentleman's face. He cannot, of course, deny the fact of your nephew's disloyalty. His views of wooing, however, may be somewhat different from those entertained by honourable men, to judge by what has come under my notice in his own case. Up to this time I have hesitated to expose him—not, I admit, for his own sake, but because I knew the pain it would cause a man like you to find his nephew's friend and chosen companion abusing the hospitality of your roof. You have an orphan girl beneath it, Arden, the attendant upon



your nieces, whose position and office one would have thought would have protected her from the designs of any man, but whom this gentleman here has made the object of his attentions.'

'That is surely impossible!' exclaimed Sir Robert. 'To whom do you refer?'

'You may well ask him,' observed Mayne, contemptuously. 'He has told a falsehood.'

'I have told the truth,' answered Walcot, calmly. 'If Mr. Mayne has really that desire he has just now expressed to elicit right from wrong, let him deny the charge I have made against him in the presence of her, whom it is no fault of his if she may not be termed his victim.'

'This is too much,' cried Mayne, his long-suppressed indignation getting at last the better of him. 'Your impudence passes all bounds, though neither it nor your lies, nor the malice of them astonish me. I should scorn, Sir Robert, to give you aught but my bare word in reply to an accusation so infamous, but for the sake of this young woman herself, and her reputation, which this man has not hesitated to sully, I accept his challenge. Let me meet her, here before you, face to face.'

With that smile of amused assurance still upon his lips, which acted on Frederic Mayne like the dart of the matador upon the bull, Mr. Walcot answered, 'Let it be so;' and touched the bell at his right hand.

'It is unnecessary, Ferdinand—have I not *your* word?' said Sir Robert gently.

'Nay, Arden, since the gentleman talks of proofs, let his desire be gratified. Parker, Sir Robert wishes to see Annabel Spence.'

And the butler left the room with astonishment depicted on his stately features.

'One word, Sir Robert, before this girl appears,' said Mayne earnestly. 'It is probable that this man here—'

'My brother-in-law,' put in the Baronet coldly.

'Unhappily he does stand in that relationship to you; but if he was of your own blood, it would still be necessary to speak the truth of him. I say it is probable that he will seek to twist a certain circumstance to his advantage, by making it appear a



premeditated act, instead of what it was, an unfortunate accident. The other morning when strolling before breakfast in the garden I happened to step into the summer-house with my cigar, and to my great surprise found that it had a tenant—the young woman in question, of whose very name I was at that time ignorant, and with whom I had never before exchanged a syllable in my life. I did speak a few commonplace words to her, to which I have no recollection that she answered anything; and on leaving the arbour I met Mr. Walcot, to whom I then explained the matter as I do now.'

Mr. Walcot gave a little laugh, by no means in the way of corroboration; it seemed to say, 'Of all the clumsy scoundrels that I have yet come across, this person is surely the most unfortunate as well as the most depraved.'

As he did so the door opened, and in walked the compromised young lady. What was unlucky for her, in the eyes of the superficial observer, was the vulgar brilliancy of her costume. Her flaunting little cap, set upon a mountain of light brown hair, was adorned with cherry-coloured ribands; her dress was blue, and disclosed a margin of petticoat trimmed with that exquisite lace which is sold for threepence-halfpenny the yard. Her face, however, was without a trace of colour; her usually bright black eyes were softened by the presence of tears, and she trembled in every limb.

'Perhaps you would like to ask this young person a few questions yourself, Sir Robert,' said Mr. Walcot.

The Baronet shook his head; his eyes were fixed on the newcomer with a look of disfavour that almost amounted to loathing. 'How could I ever have thought this girl resembled my sainted Madeline,' was what he was saying to himself. And, indeed, Miss Spence was far from looking her best, whether as respected her attire, or the expression of her face, which was downcast, and even guilty. She had taken up a corner of her apron, and was applying it to her eyes with persistent vigour.

'Annabel Spence,' said Mr. Walcot, speaking with great distinctness, 'Sir Robert has sent for you not in anger, but in sincere sorrow, for an imprudence into which he has reason to believe you have been led to by another person more to blame than yourself. No harm is intended to you, if only you will

speaking the truth ; the questions which I shall put to you are few and simple. You will be caused no unnecessary pain ; but they must be answered. When you met Mr. Mayne the other morning in the terrace summer-house, was it by design on your part ?

Annabel began to sob, and to apply her apron to her eyes more vigorously than ever.

‘Nun—nun—no, sir.’

‘Very good ; we are glad to hear it. But was it by design on his ? I mean were you there by his appointment ?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Mayne started, and looked at the girl with supreme amazement.

‘You hear her,’ said Sir Robert.

‘Yes, sir, I hear her ; but her words are not her own words : they have been put in her mouth beforehand by that man. Unhappy girl ! you know not what misfortunes you may be drawing down on other heads by so infamous a falsehood ; as for me, I care nothing for such slanders. But I charge you, for the sake of others who have been kind to you beneath this roof, and whose bread you eat, to tell the truth, and shame—this villain ! Do you dare to assert, so far from having appointed to meet you, that I ever spoke one word to you before that morning, or that I said anything on that occasion which you might not repeat now ?’

‘The girl must not be intimidated,’ exclaimed Mr. Walcot, sternly ; for Annabel was sobbing bitterly.

‘Quite right, quite right,’ assented Sir Robert. ‘For my part I am quite satisfied as to this matter ; but I will ask one question more, the answer to which will include everything. Did this gentleman here ever address you in unbecoming language ?’

‘Nun—nun—no, sir.’

‘I mean, Annabel, in language unbecoming one in his station to one in yours—the language of affection ?’

She looked up as if by a great effort, her fine eyes swimming in tears ; ‘Oh, yes, sir, many times.’

‘That will do ; you may leave the room,’ said Sir Robert ; then added, with but little less of peremptoriness, ‘and you,

Mr. Mayne, may leave my house as soon as you can conveniently do so. And I must beg that in the mean time you hold no converse with any ladies of my family, whom your conduct has insulted beyond expression.'

It was in Mayne's mind to warn Sir Robert even then that a day would surely come when he would know how he had been duped and deceived, and would recognize the true character of the man in whom he misplaced such confidence; but, after all, this would only be assertion, and what would that avail when even the proofs he would have brought forward had been treated with indifference and contempt? Moreover, it must be confessed that Mr. Mayne had been a good deal discomposed by two experiences that had happened within the last five minutes; he had been accused and found guilty of conduct unbecoming a gentleman, and had found himself compelled to contradict a lady.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## IN COUNCIL.

IF it had not been for the serious consequences likely to arise, as regarded others, from his defeat, Frederic Mayne's strong sense of humour would have almost caused him to enjoy his own discomfiture at the hands of his enemy. Never certainly—though he had belonged to a midshipman's mess—had such amazing impudence been exhibited within his experience, as that displayed by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, who, so far from bowing to fate in the shape of a charge of subornation and dishonesty, supported by written proof, had sublimely soared into the region of Public Prosecutor, and persuaded 'the Court' to dismiss his accuser with disgrace and reprobation. Conscious as he was of his innocence, and of the cruel wrong that Sir Robert's incredulity had done him, Mayne did not for an instant contemplate disobeying his host's command that he should leave his roof, and hold no converse with the ladies of his household. In *his* eyes the young man felt that he was guilty of the offence laid to his charge, and being so, that it would be an outrage on the hospitality which he had so long enjoyed to disregard Sir Robert's sentence, however unjust and harsh, to avoid meeting any of its inmates, and took his way to the Manor Farm, where he well knew the Curate would be awaiting with impatience the result of his late interview. To his great relief he also found here his friend George Gresham, whom Dyneley, overcome with a sense of responsibility, had after the other's departure on his eventful errand taken into his confidence.

'Well, what has happened?' ejaculated both young men, rising eagerly from their chairs as the emissary presented himself in the Curate's parlour.

'Nothing—— At least except to *me*,' replied Mayne, with an air half-crestfallen, half comic, 'I have been tried by court-martial, found guilty, and turned out of the ship.'

'What! you don't mean to say that my uncle didn't believe you?' exclaimed Gresham, incredulously.

'Most certainly I do; he will believe nobody except Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.'

'But the evidence, the written evidence,' urged the Curate; 'no one could get over *that*.'

'Yes one could, if one tore it up and refused to read it, which is just what Sir Robert did,' was the quiet reply.

'But my uncle must be bewitched?' cried Gresham, angrily. 'This Walcot must be the Devil himself!'

'That is Gilbert Holme's view,' returned Mayne, coolly, 'and upon my life I begin to think it a just one. If you had heard the villain quote, if not Scripture, yet morality, for his own ends, as I did, you would think so too.'

'What on earth had *he* to do with morality,' exclaimed Gresham, with contemptuous impatience.

'Well, a good deal,' said Mayne, with a laugh—which, to say the truth, was a little forced. The subject of Miss Spence was an unpleasant one. He knew that his audience would acquit him of all serious intention of wrong, but there had been something even in the Curate's manner, when he had described that arbour scene, which smacked of incredulity. Young men are so hard upon young men.

'Instead of replying to *my* charges, he accused me of a flirtation with your fair cousins' ladies' maid. Dyneley knows the circumstances on which the accusation was founded, and without going into them, I think that you know *me* quite well enough to acquit me of such a charge.'

'Of course,' said Gresham, 'Dyneley has been telling me, however, that he feared this fellow would take some advantage of your little imprudence.'

'There was no little imprudence,' interrupted Mayne, with irritation; 'it was a pure accident my meeting with the girl in the harbour.'

'No doubt it was; but you might have indulged, perhaps, in some innocent chaff, which by some perversion——'

'You are altogether wrong, Gresham; I give you my word of honour.'

'Yes, yes,' said Dyneley, 'there was really nothing in it, though of course the circumstances were suspicious, and in malicious hands easily capable of misinterpretation.'

'Well, they *were* misrepresented,' continued Mayne. 'And you may imagine Sir Robert's indignation at the suggestion of my having so misbehaved myself.'

'I should have insisted on the girl herself being called to prove my innocence,' observed the Curate. 'I can understand your wishing to spare her feelings, but in so serious a matter——'

'She *was* called,' put in Mayne, with an uncomfortable laugh, 'and would you believe it—suborned, no doubt, like the rest of them by that scoundrel—she said I met her by appointment, and that I had made love to her more than once.'

There was a total silence, save for a single ejaculation of Mr. Gresham's. 'Oh, by Jove,' he said, in a hushed voice.

'Very good, gentlemen,' observed Mayne, bitterly; 'it seems, then, that you are of Sir Robert's opinion and Mr. Walcot's?'

'No, no,' cried the Curate, eagerly.

'My dear fellow, how can you be so foolish?' remonstrated Gresham, convulsed with suppressed mirth. 'Of course, we believe your word. Only the idea of this young person—your chief witness—not only breaking down under cross-examination, but going over to the other side, and in so delicate a matter; it is really very funny.' And the young man threw himself back into his chair, and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

'I am glad you are amused, Gresham,' observed Mayne, severely. He was very angry, and the more so because he suspected the Curate of maintaining his own gravity only by the greatest efforts. 'There is very little else to amuse you in this affair, I do assure you. I was not the only person charged with flirtation. Mr. Walcot accused you point blank of making love to Miss Hurt, just as he did me in the case of the waiting-maid.'

'The insolent hound!' exclaimed Gresham, sobered in an instant. 'Did he dare to breathe a word against Elise?'

'Well, he was not very complimentary in his innuendoes, so far as you were concerned, and that's the truth. However, what moved your uncle against you was the fact of your having departed from your allegiance as regards another.'

'I never promised it. She knows I never did.'

'The point is, my dear Gresham, that your uncle supposed it was promised. When he asked me, "Could I deny that you paid attentions to Miss Hurt?" and I was silent, I saw he was deeply angered. Yet since I was not born blind, and had been under the same roof with you and her so long, what *could* I say, Gresham?'

'The truth,' answered the other impetuously. 'Of course you were right in what you did, if you suspected my attachment; but as for me, I will tell him this very day that I mean to make *Elise* my wife. Evelyn, God bless her! though I love her as my own sister, never cared for me in that way. No uncle's wishes could make her do so. He is neither so unjust nor so unkind as to resent the instincts of nature. It is true I have endeavoured to conceal from him my affection for *Elise*; that was a piece of cowardice I own unworthy of me, and still more so of her; it was only at my urgent entreaty that she consented to it, and even then unwillingly. Oh! if you but knew that girl's nobility of spirit; her undaunted courage in the very jaws of death; her simplicity and frankness—if I had only let her be frank! Yes, I will go to him at once and tell him all.'

The young man had risen from his seat, and taken a quick stride towards the door ere the Curate could lay hand upon his arm.

'Are you mad, Gresham,' he cried, 'thus to rush upon destruction? Do you not see that Walcot has first dropped poison into your uncle's ears, and then closed them. To an appeal from you he would be worse than deaf. We must waste no more strength in individual struggles against the common enemy. We must make common cause against him. Lady Arden herself, nay, even the young ladies, must be with us, not excepting little Frank. Such a weight of feeling, backed by the testimony which this man Walcot has not destroyed—for Holme, at least, is a living voice we can rely upon



—will surely be irresistible. Only we must do nothing rashly, nor without due concert, however strong our cause, and however confident, and justly confident, we may feel in Sir Robert's love of truth and justice, it is certain that one who loves neither has for the present obtained absolute power over him.'

'But how the Devil has he done it!' inquired Gresham, with impatient irritation.

'The Devil only knows,' replied Mayne; 'but he *has* done it. He has him body and soul; so that every one in Sir Robert's power is at this man's tender mercy. Dyneley is quite right. You have got your work cut out for you.'

'Still,' said the Curate, 'if we can only gain Sir Robert's ear—'

'You will find this man sitting "squat" by the side of it, just as the Fiend does in "Paradise lost." Sir Robert's reply will be like the notice of a circular, "all applications to be made to the secretary." You have not seen what I have seen. By Jingo, if I were his next of kin, as you are, Gresham, I would take out a writ *de lunatico inquirendo*.'

'You are not serious, I am sure, Mayne,' said Gresham, reprovingly. 'I should be ungrateful, indeed, no matter what course my uncle may think proper to pursue, if I ever treated him with aught but respect.'

'Very good; you will act as you think proper. But as for me, I confess my sense of obligation to Sir Robert Arden is somewhat less than it was a few hours ago.'

'You have certainly been treated very ill,' said Dyneley. 'However, it is impossible but that the right will come uppermost and justice be done, and that within the next twenty-four hours. In the meantime, as you think it proper to absent yourself from Sir Robert's roof till all is explained, take up your quarters here with me.'

'Not I,' answered Mayne, resolutely, 'though I thank you all the same for your hospitality. I dare not trust myself within sight and touch of Ferdinand Walcot. If I were once to permit myself the luxury of a few words in private with him—dear me, I can't bear to think of it; in five minutes (or I have forgotten my training) that shark would be a jelly fish.—I sup-

pose I can procure a horse and trap in the village without trespassing upon the Hall stables for them.'

'Yes, yes,' said the Curate, thoughtfully. 'I can drive you over to Mirton in the dog-cart myself at once, if you must go. Perhaps it is better you should do so, for the sake of the ladies. If any domestic dissension should arise, your presence would, without doubt, render it still more distressing.'

Notwithstanding his sense of the danger that threatened the household at the Hall, and his sincere regret at Mayne's departure under such untoward circumstances, the Curate was by no means in a depressed condition. He had a firm belief that matters would in the end be set right, and then—being human—he could not but feel a certain elation in the knowledge that had just been imparted to him for the first time for certain, that not only had Gresham given up all intention of aspiring to Evelyn's hand, but that Evelyn herself had never encouraged him to do so.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## AN EMBARRASSING REPEAT.

HOW often it happens that though misfortunes occur to us in sufficient plenty, the one especial thing to which we have looked forward with prescient pain is spared us ! Something else, quite unlooked for, may happen to vex us, but not *that* in the expectation of which we may have passed sleepless nights and anxious days. [Wherein lies the folly of the Despondent, half of whose miseries in life are caused by their misplaced apprehensions.] Thus the incubus that sat upon George Gresham from the moment he had heard of Dyneley's tale of Walcot's wrong-doings, and which grew heavier with every word of Mayne's supplementary narrative, was the thought, 'And I shall have to meet this scoundrel at the dinner-table to-night, and be obliged not only to keep silence as to what has happened, but to be civil to him.' There was no time before the family meal to lay before Lady Arden the facts of the case, or to devise any plan of attack with her against the common enemy ; and to attack him without a plan would be, it was now evident, to court defeat and discomfiture. Gresham foresaw that his own future was threatened, that his whole life was in danger of being marred by this man's hatred and subtlety ; but he was young and sanguine, and to do him justice, felt even more keenly the humiliating position in which Lady Arden and the girls were placed than his own not unmerited disgrace. He had invited his uncle's wrath by his own duplicity ; it was the natural punishment of his own cowardice in not having confessed his love for Elise ; but Lady Arden and her children had done nothing to deserve the loss of Sir Robert's confidence and favour. And he justly feared the worst—or something at least that was very bad—for them. Sir Robert would never have shut his ears to such a tale as Mayne had had to tell him, concerning the persecution of

poor innocent Frank, had he not surrendered his judgment to Walcot's keeping; and if Lady Arden's personal advocacy of the cause of her own son should fail, it would be a sign indeed, that the whole family—and their future prospect—were at this scoundrel's mercy. In any case it was clear that their position was perilous; and the coming appeal to the master of the Hall would be a crucial test of it. There was no alternative between Walcot's being kicked out of the house, and its present inmates remaining there in a subordinate position.

It was with a heavy heart then that Gresham dressed for dinner that night and descended to the drawing-room, and yet, as we have said, it was filled quite as much with indignation as with sorrow. He felt that whatever he should eat in the presence of this subtle villain would disagree with him, and that he should need all his self-control to prevent his 'saying things' that would have similar effect upon Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's digestion. Moreover, it would not be an easy task, in the presence of that gentleman and Sir Robert, to invent a reason for Mayne's sudden departure, without leave-taking, from that hospitable roof. It was probable that whatever he said would be accepted in silence, but if it was not so, if anything was uttered by Walcot to Frederic Mayne's disparagement as a gentleman, Gresham was quite resolute to give him the lie.

Mr. Gresham was certainly not in a frame of mind that would be approved of by the faculty as one in which to sit down to a late dinner.

To his great surprise he perceived at once by the countenances of the three ladies that something had happened to put *them* also in an abnormal state. He was late, of course, by a few minutes, but neither Sir Robert nor his brother-in-law were with the rest as usual.

'Your uncle is unwell,' George,' explained Lady Arden, 'and will dine in his own room.'

She did not even mention Mr. Walcot, but he understood at once that that gentleman was keeping his host company, and also that Lady Arden disapproved of it.

'We shall, indeed, be a small party then,' said Gresham, 'for I am sorry to say Mayne has received news which has compelled him to leave us at a moment's notice. He begged me

to make a thousand apologies for him, for you had all gone for a walk (this was fortunately true) when he got the message, and Dyneley took him over to Mirton in the dogcart to catch the coach at once.'

'We are all sorry to lose Mr. Mayne,' said Lady Arden, quietly. Gresham felt that this would not have been her way of receiving such a piece of intelligence under ordinary circumstances; but on the other hand, her expression of goodwill showed she had heard nothing—or at least not what he feared—to his friend's disadvantage.

'I am sure he regrets the necessity of his departure as much as is possible,' said Gresham earnestly. 'I am not at liberty just now to state the reason of it; but I will explain it to-morrow, Lady Arden. In the meantime I am sure you will acquit him of any rudeness.'

'I don't think Mr. Mayne could be rude if he tried,' observed Evelyn.

'You are right, Evy,' answered Gresham, gratefully. 'He has too kind a heart.'

'I am sure dear Baba will miss him exceedingly,' said Milly. There was nothing surprising in the Great Baba's views, which were always weighty if not final, being alluded to on this subject more than on any other, yet there was a blush on Milly's cheek, and an embarrassment in her tone, which did not escape Gresham's notice, and which under other circumstances, would certainly have provoked his raillery. He was sure that the girl felt sorrow for his friend's departure on her own account, and thought he knew why she affected personally to ignore it; but there was something in her manner and that of her sister, as he had observed in Lady Arden herself, which was both unexpected and unaccountable. He had certainly looked for some surprise as well as regret to have been expressed at this bad news; but they were silent. The reason of which he guessed to be that the minds of his companions were already occupied by some other event of greater consequence, and to judge by their faces, of sadder import.

'Mr. Mayne's departure is a sad break-up to our little party, no doubt,' said Lady Arden, with the air of one who dismisses an unpleasant subject, 'but there are worse breakings-up in store for us, I fear.'

To this Gresham answered nothing, first because he saw that the observation made the girls look very uncomfortable, and secondly, because he did not understand its meaning. Lady Arden often talked, when despondent and dyspeptic, about her own 'breaking-up,' and of her doubts whether she herself would be long 'spared' to them—in supposed allusion to the celestial beings who were yearning for her company in another sphere. Fortunately the conversation was here cut short by the presence of Parker the butler, who announced that dinner was served in a tone so especially unctuous that Gresham felt more certain than ever that some family catastrophe had taken place, a conviction which was not weakened by the behaviour of the company at table.

His own attempts to lift the conversation could not be expected under the circumstances to be very effective, and no one seconded them. Lady Arden uttered more sighs than words, and the girls were almost as silent, while the three collectively ate about as much as three sparrows, without any of the liveliness displayed by those energetic little creatures over their meals.

Once Gresham attempted to take the bull by the horns, to evoke, as it were, a ministerial explanation, by hoping that there had been no serious change for the worse in his uncle's health since the morning, to which Lady Arden had replied stiffly, 'I see no marked change in him myself, but I am assured that there is such by one whose words in this house, is Law.'

'It isn't Gospel, though, nor anything like it,' answered Gresham, sharply.

'To dispute it, however, is to be worse than an Infidel,' answered her ladyship, 'so pray be silent.'

As the ladies rose from the table his hostess stooped down and whispered in his ear, 'Go to the smoking-room, George, at once, and whatever you may hear going on in the house, take no notice of it, but remain where you are. I will come to you when all is over.'

Gresham obeyed in silent amazement. What was likely to be going on in the house, and what *could* she mean by 'all being over?'



## CHAPTER XXXII.

## A DOUBLE DEPARTURE.

LIKE some deserted Paterfamilias who awaits below stairs the tidings of an addition to his family from the lips of the doctor, Gresham remained in an attitude of attention and anxiety for some hours, with the cigar in his mouth now alight and now extinguished. Strange sounds reached his ears from the distant hall, of muffled voices, of shuffling feet, and of the dragging of heavy weights, and at last he distinctly caught the sound of wheels on the gravel sweep. Could that be the Doctor's arrival or departure? or was it possible, he wondered, that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was gone? It was not unlikely, though it seemed too good to be true, that after some battle royal between Sir Robert and his wife, the latter, though he had already evidence that she had suffered in the fray, might have conquered, and driven the enemy from her roof. So firmly did this idea gain possession of his mind, that presently, when Lady Arden herself entered the room, with a white and anguished face, he started up and exclaimed mechanically, 'Has he left the Hall?'

'Yes,' answered she sadly, and burst into tears.

It was so unusual for her, despite her invalidish ways, to give way to weakness of this sort, that he felt at once some dire catastrophe had taken place. Her victory, perhaps, had cost her a serious quarrel with her husband.

'Yes, George,' she sobbed, 'he has gone; never, as I believe, to return again. I have been cruelly used; but I do not blame my dear husband. He is no longer master of his own actions.'

'Good Heavens! Lady Arden, is my uncle mad?'

'Yes, George; not, indeed, mad in one sense, but worse than mad to leave those who love and honour him, to place



himself in the hands of—I must speak the truth, George—of a designing and unprincipled man.'

'My dear Madam, that is only half the truth,' observed Gresham. 'Ferdinand Walcot is a most pernicious villain! But I understood you that, at whatever sacrifice, you had got rid of him—that he had left the Hall?'

'And so he has, George; but he has taken my husband with him.'

'What? Taken Sir Robert with him—away from you and yours, and his own home?'

She nodded, for her heart was too full for speech.

'But on what pretext?'

'His health. He declares that his "beloved brother"—as he dared to call him in my presence—needs change of scene, sea air, repose, and I know not what. Then said I, "My place is by his side;" whereupon he answered that the physician, whom it appears my husband has been privately consulting by letter, had decided otherwise; that the change was to be complete; that as little as possible to remind him of old associations were imperatively insisted upon. "Then why," cried I, "are *you* to be his companion?"

'Then my poor husband answered for the first time for himself, that he could not be parted from his Ferdinand. What humiliation, what disgrace, George!' and the poor woman dropped into a chair and rocked herself to and fro;

'It is, indeed, my dear Lady Arden; most humiliating and disgraceful—for my poor uncle; but you, at least have no cause to reproach yourself.'

'Yes, I have,' exclaimed she passionately. 'I have been indolent and careless. I have suffered this man to get the upper hand of him, without an effort to prevent it, and merely for the sake of peace and quietness. I have not done my duty. I scarcely blame this—this wicked wretch—more than myself. I have been fully deaf and blind to many things for many years. Ye his punishment is more than I have deserved.'

'It is, indeed,' said Gresham, sympathisingly. 'It is impossible you could have guessed half the villainy that has been going on about you. I have a tale to tell you which will un-

mask it all ; and I wish to Heaven I had told it before now. Even as it is, when my uncle comes to know about it—which he shall do from my own lips—it cannot be but that his eyes will be opened.’

Lady Arden shook her head. ‘No George ; he must find this man out for himself ; then he will come back to us who love him, and in his right mind. Nothing that *you* can say would stir him a hair’s-breadth. He does not pretend that I have done anything to vex him ; but with you he is vehemently displeased. The one thing I have been able to do was to keep you and him apart this night. I could not trust you, knowing how outspoken you are, to see him before he went. If you had met, with that villain standing by his side to egg him on, I am certain you would have resented it. Even as it is, I fear much evil has been done to you, as respects your future.’

‘Dear Lady Arden, do not think of me.’

‘I cannot help it, for you have been wronged—materially at least—even worse than I. You are Sir Robert’s own flesh and blood ; his only relative. And I fear—I do fear, George—that he will now take but little count of that. As for me, I was amply, generously provided for on my marriage ; and my dear children, if they should reap no further benefits, can never regard your uncle save with affection and gratitude. It was my hope that one of them—Dear George, I have a heavy sorrow, I fear, in store for you.’

‘If you refer to Evelyn, dear Lady Arden,’ said Gresham, earnestly, ‘pray dismiss that sorrow from your mind. She will suffer nothing—nor to say truth, shall I—from the separation at which you hint. We have loved one another as brother and sister, and shall ever love ; but in no other way. It was my duty, perhaps, to have told you so before ; though, indeed, I have never represented it as otherwise.’

‘Then Sir Robert knew this ?’ exclaimed Lady Arden.

‘He did, and more. I am grateful to him that he took it for granted, without representing me to you, as he might have done, in an unfavourable light.’

‘I remember now that he said you had deceived us all ; but I had no room in my mind for any deceiver save one.’

'Your daughter herself will answer for me,' said Gresham, drawing himself up, 'that I have in no way deceived her. I have not been so frank to others as I might have been; but I have never misrepresented my sentiments to herself. There is no one I more respect and revere more; and, perhaps, at one time—but she never loved me, Lady Arden.'

'Well, well, I do not understand it. But if matters are so, it is not now to be regretted. Sir Robert said that all was over between you two, and I imagined that he meant to put his veto on your marriage. I have been blind to everything, it seems, and like one just recovering sight all is dark and confused.' She passed her hand over her eyes, and sighed wearily.

'Dear Lady Arden, I feel it a cruelty to question you in this matter, but so much hangs on it, and time may be of such priceless value. Would you tell me briefly, how it all happened?'

'Well, a few hours ago, having heard that there had been some disturbance among the domestics, and that it was being brought to Sir Robert's ears instead of mine, I went into the study for the purpose of setting things right, and especially of saving my husband from such a source of worry, for which his state of health made him particularly unfitted. I found Sir Robert and Mr. Walcot with certain papers on the desk before them; and Parker and the footman in the act of leaving the room. I at once asked what was the matter, and my husband answered, "Nothing dear," though his face flushed very much, as if in contradiction to his words.

"Sir Robert has only been transacting a matter of business," explained Mr. Walcot.

"But the men?" I said. "I hope nothing is amiss with Parker, for he has been with us so long."

"No, no, nothing," repeated my husband. Then Mr. Walcot whispered to him, and he continued, "The fact is, my dear—and, as Ferdinand says, there is no reason why you should not know it—I called the men in as witnesses; I have been making my will."

"Good Heavens," cried I, "why so, Robert? What should put that into your head?"

"I have been far from well, dear," he answered, "for some time ; I am not so young as I was ; there is no knowing what may happen ; it is always well to be prepared for the worst."

'At this Mr. Walcot nodded approval, and added gravely, "In your case, Arden, I hope we may say, for the best."

'His tone was full of tenderness, but his face, which was turned towards me, wore an expression which chilled my very blood. It was one of devilish malignity and triumph.

"I don't think it was illness, Robert," said I, boldly, "that put into your head to make your will, but this man."

"Her ladyship fears that her interests have not been sufficiently consulted," observed Walcot coldly. Then I lost my temper, George, and gave that man the lie. Of course it was wrong and unladylike, but there are some things no woman can stand ; to see him there by my husband's side dearer to him in every way than myself, and suggesting to him that I was actuated by such a sordid fear, was too much for me. I told him what I thought of his conduct and of himself without reserve ; and turning to my husband I bade him choose between Ferdinand Walcot and me—his wife ; for that I would not dwell another twenty-four hours under the same roof with such a scoundrel."

'I should have liked to have heard you,' cried Gresham, enthusiastically.

'Yes, George, but I believe it was the very worst thing I could have said, for it brought to a head the very subject which it seems my husband and this man had been debating—namely, the necessity of Sir Robert going abroad.

'Then the wretch turned to my husband, and again he whispered, and again my husband bowed his head in assent, but this time, I am sure, not without great distress and perplexity.

"I am sorry, Lady Arden, that your mind has been prejudiced against me," said Mr. Walcot, whom my poor husband had thus in my presence made his spokesman, "but you and I are, at all events, still agreed in one thing, that this question of Sir Robert's health is paramount," and then he went on to say what I have told you, about the necessity for change, &c. He also said that many things had happened at the Hall of late to trouble Sir Robert, and which rendered it advisable to sever

for the present all associations with its tenants, among them some misconduct of Mr. Mayne's, to which I hardly listened to (so furious was I with this man, and so positive that he was speaking falsehood), and also some "deception," as he called it, on your part, which had set your uncle justly against you. And to all this my poor husband nodded approval, though, I noticed, without once raising his eyes to mine. Then, without vouchsafing a word of reply to his mouthpiece, I demanded of Sir Robert himself to be allowed to be his companion on his travels in search of health, as my relation to him entitled me to be. The appeal evidently moved him, but on Mr. Walcot's reminding him that I had just stated that I would not live under the same roof with him (Walcot), my poor husband murmured, "True, true," and then, "I cannot part from Ferdinand." And he has *not* parted from him,' concluded the poor lady, once more bursting into a passion of tears, 'he has taken him with him to murder him, for what I know, and will, at all events, never, never suffer him to return to me and mine.'

Notwithstanding the distress that Gresham experienced at the spectacle of Lady Arden's grief, her excessive indulgence of it did afford him a very welcome opportunity for reflection. If he had had to reply to her last words upon the instant, he would have found it very difficult to say aught with hope or comfort in it, for, as a matter of fact, he took a view of matters at least as gloomy as her own, and even more so. It was no doubt her passion that caused her to say that Walcot, 'for all she knew,' intended to murder Sir Robert, but it really did seem to Gresham that that terrible contingency was by no means excluded from the chapter of possibilities. That the baronet's will had just been made largely in his brother-in-law's favour he felt certain; and his belief in Walcot's villany had no limit. Moreover, he felt that Lady Arden had good grounds for her conviction that her husband's evil genius would never permit him to return to the Hall, which he knew by this time was inhabited by his enemies only. At Halcombe, too, were the proofs of his dishonest and cruel conduct, which at a distance were comparatively powerless to harm him, since he

would be sure to intercept all letters, or throw discredit on their contents.

'My dear Lady Arden,' said Gresham, after a long silence, 'Time tries all, and in the end my uncle cannot fail to have his eyes opened to this man's character. The generosity of his disposition will then at once cause him to own himself to have been in the wrong, and he will return to us a wiser man—a better and a kinder he cannot be.'

'You have a noble heart, George,' said Lady Arden, pressing his hand. 'It is not for my sake, I know, that you refrain from reproaching my dear husband. His present severity does not cause you to forget old kindnesses.'

'Why should it?' returned Gresham, simply. 'The kindnesses were his own; the severity and injustice have been grafted for the moment on him by another. You are right in saying that he is not himself. He is the mere tool and mouth-piece of Ferdinand Walcot.'

'But how could he ever have become so? That is the mystery to me. I know that Mr. Walcot has a soft tongue and a strong will; but that he should have power over my husband to cause him to do ill is incomprehensible to me. If Sir Robert were not what we all know him to be, one would think this man had some hold on him—some compromising secret—the fear of the divulgence of which made my poor husband his slave.'

'That, however as you say is out of the question,' answered Gresham, musingly. 'No my impression is that my uncle is the victim of some superstitious belief, and that Walcot works upon his credulity—or rather, I should say, that is Mayne's impression, and his opinion is worth more than mine. He has seen something of these spirit-rappers, and of the influence they acquire over credulous natures, and Sir Robert is credulous, you know, when his confidence has once been won.'

Lady Arden sighed, not so much from the consciousness of having failed to win her husband's confidence as from the reflection that she had not striven to win it.

'Good night, dear George,' she said, presently. 'I am very worn and weary. To-morrow, perhaps, the future may look brighter; to-night all is dark to me.'

'Good night, dear Lady Arden.'



Their parting was very affectionate ; they had always liked one another, and their common love and pity for Sir Robert in his misfortune (as they both considered it) drew them still nearer together. Weary as Lady Arden was, she did not however, omit to pay her usual nightly visit to, the Great Baba, who held *levées* in his chamber at all hours, like the Kings of France. Such visitations never disturbed him ; he would open his large blue eyes mechanically at the kisses of his mother and sisters, and with a murmured, "Dood night," close them again in slumber. But upon this occasion he woke up ; a tear had fallen from his mother's eye, as she stooped down to caress him upon his tender cheek.

'What Mumma ty for ?' he inquired wonderingly.

'Because dear Papa has gone, darling,' she answered, unable to restrain her grief.

'Why didn't Uncky Ferdinand go instead ?' was the unexpected reply.

'He is gone with him, my darling.'

'Oh. Then Papa has not gone to heaven ?' observed the little atom, sedately.

'No, no ; not yet, darling, thank goodness,' answered his mother, with a want of logic in singular contrast to the stern rationalism of her child. 'Papa has gone away in the carriage, but I fear for ever so long a time.'

'Oh, then, he'll tum home again,' was the comforting rejoinder. 'I thought he had gone in the feather coach.'

Which was the Great Baba's euphonious term for a hearse and plumes.



## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## A WORD FROM VERSAILLES.

IT was fortunate that Gresham had not been hasty in stating to Lady Arden the wrong that had been done to his friend by Mr. Walcot's machinations, for he had no doubt that it was at his instigation that false witness had been borne against him; had he done so it was not in woman's nature, or, at all events, in that of her ladyship, not to have "had it out" with Miss Annabel Spence, which would have led to complications. For on the morning after the departure of the master of the Hall, arrived Mr. Hayling, the family lawyer, with "instructions" which he had been directed to communicate forthwith to those concerned. From their nature it was evident that Sir Robert contemplated a protracted absence, since each head of a department without doors received rules for his guidance for some time to come; while as to mere domestic matters, there was this singular enactment that no change should be made in the present household without Sir Robert's written consent.

In this, Lady Arden fortunately only saw a new impertinence and arrogance on the part of Walcot, and not, as he doubtless intended it to be, a positive insult. It was pretty certain he had taken it for granted that Mayne had laid the whole circumstances of his case before her, when no alternative would have been left to her but to dismiss Annabel Spence, or to lose her own self-respect. He had secured Sir Robert's consent to retain the girl by pointing out that she was not to blame, or, at all events, only very slightly so in comparison with her would-be seducer, while to turn her out of doors on such a charge would be her ruin. Thus he hoped at once to bring husband and wife into collision, and, at the same time—since he was sure to get his way—to retain at the Hall one person at least devoted to his interests. He knew

that the whole hive would be roused against him, and indeed that, for all his craft and power, they would have destroyed him, had he not hit upon the audacious plan of carrying off with him their Queen Bee, Sir Robert.

On Lady Arden's communicating Mr. Hayling's message to Gresham, that young gentleman perceived at once—for hate sharpens our wits as much as love—this device of the common enemy, and resolved to frame what he had to say to his hostess in such a way as for the present to shield Miss Spence from the punishment she so richly deserved, which was the very course, indeed, that his friend himself had enjoined on him. Frederic Mayne was far too chivalrous to wish to be revenged upon a poor servant girl for an offence in which she had been only the instrument; and also, I am afraid, he felt that such a course of action would have tended to diminish the long score he had set down to the credit of Mr. Walcot, and which it was his fixed and firm intention to settle in full.

'My dear fellow,' he wrote to his friend upon the day after he reached London, 'it has often been cast up against me that I have no object in life; but that is no longer the case. My *raison d'être* for the future is to be even with "Uncle Ferdy." I am not so clever by half, but I have health and strength, and several thousands a year, all which shall be expended in this pursuit rather than not gain my ends. The date of our return match cannot, it is true, at present be fixed, but it will come off, believe me. Of course I am very anxious to hear from you, if only from selfish motives. I trust most sincerely that you have been able to clear my character with Lady Arden without implicating that impressionable young person with the too sensational memory—what she did remember, poor girl, was always, bear in mind, what Walcot taught her. As to what happened in respect to that gentleman and Sir Robert, I probably know more than you do. They started yesterday from Folkestone for the South of France; your uncle, I was told by my informant—who has five pounds a week and his expenses for keeping his eye on the runaway couple—looking, you will be sorry to hear, exceedingly ill; my "uncle Ferdy" appearing, on the other hand, to be in excellent health and spirits; a perfect green bay tree: how long he will "flourish" remains

to be seen ; this woodman is very eager, and his axe will not fail for want of sharpening (if I don't say "d—— him" it is because it is superfluous, and also because I'm always thinking it). I hope matters have been so explained that you may be able to give my most respectful regards to Lady Arden and the young ladies ; remember me to poor Frank in any case—who might put Master Groad into the millstream with a great sense of satisfaction, and without fear of consequences ; and offer my homage to the Great Baba—whose views, I know, coincide with my own respecting our common uncle. I am looking about for a dreadful toyman for the dear child to shoot at, which shall be much more like F. W. than Quilp's famous figure head was to Kit. "Oh, that I had him here," &c. Do not forget also to remember me cordially to Dyneley. He is a most capital good fellow, but he entertains fanatical views about the forgiveness of injuries. The most he could extract from me with respect to "Uncle Ferdy" is that I would forgive him—if he escaped my righteous indignation. Before all things we must pay our debts. I picture you all breathing freely in the absence of the oppressor, and yet so genuinely sorry about Sir Robert. Of course it was "the spirits" who did it ; their power—or rather the weakness of poor humanity in connection with them—is wounded. Our difficulties will, I fear, be half over, even if Walcot shews himself (as he is sure to do sooner or later) to his brother-in-law in his true colours ; for nothing is so hard in the way of owning oneself wrong—even to generous and forgiving natures such as are to be found at Halcombe—as to admit that we have been deceived and cajoled. In case Holme has to leave the farm for "rounding," as Groad called it, on his tyrant, I shall be able, perhaps, to do something for him. You will write particularly to me respecting Miss Evelyn and Miss Millicent, who, I hope, have heard nothing to my discredit. The mere thought of this is intolerable to me. I fly from it, and all the more eagerly from having experienced its contact—to the contemplation of my new object in life. Surely by giving one's whole time and attention to it, it ought to be attained. You will say I have "Uncle

Ferdy" on the brain. I am afraid it is so, and so it will be till I have him on the hip.—Yours ever faithfully,

‘FREDERIC MAYNE.’

‘A telegram just informs me that our respective uncles have reached Marseilles, where they shew signs of remaining for the present.’

The postscript was the first intimation that the family at Halcombe had received of the movements of Sir Robert, whose silence sufficiently indicated his high displeasure. In the meantime there had been several councils held at the Hall, and one or two (where the calumet, or pipe of amity, was not wanting) between Gresham and Dyneley at the Manor Farm. Unhappily a ‘masterly inactivity’ was the only course of action for the present open to them—with one exception. When Lady Arden had been placed in possession of the facts respecting the persecution of her son, she dismissed Mr. Groad from her service upon the spot. He did not come under the head of domestic servants, and was therefore unprotected by Sir Robert’s edict; but it is doubtful whether, even if he had been, her ladyship would have endured his presence at Halcombe. Thanks to Gresham’s knowledge of his transactions in peaches (which he shrewdly suspected was not the first), Mr. Groad made no strenuous resistance, but started off with his hopeful son, three months’ wages in advance, and the black parrot, within twenty-four hours.

Gilbert Holme, returning on that afternoon from Mirton, met the covered cart which contained this ‘happy family’ coming over the moor, and proffered a good-natured ‘Good-bye;’ but the only reply he got—which was, however, some explanation for their silence—was from that truthful bird, who croaked as usual, ‘We are all for ourselves here,’ and was incontinently shaken, cage and all, by Jem, for holding communication with the enemy.

If Lady Arden’s wrath against one of Mr. Walcot’s mere instruments burnt thus fiercely, it may be imagined with what feelings she regarded that gentleman himself. With all his knowledge of human nature he probably underrated the re-

sentment he had aroused in her, the love of a mother for her child being a factor that men of his class are incapable of estimating, though they can appreciate numbers (in financial matters) up to millions. Of course she was for the present powerless, but from that moment there were possibilities of reprisal in her, which, if his eyes could have read them, would have paled his dishonest cheek.

Mr. George Gresham (who would have wrung his neck, however, with much satisfaction) was far less inimical to him; indeed he was almost grateful to Mr. Walcot in one particular, namely, for that ukase for leaving the household undisturbed, which secured to him the society of his Elise.

'No matter what happens to me, my darling, in the future,' he whispered to her, consolingly, 'I am yours for ever, and I could almost forgive the scoundrel for not having separated us in the meantime.'

At which that prudent and astute young Teutoness shook her little head. 'Oh, George,' she said, 'has love so blinded you that you do not see this man's intention in allowing me to remain here? He wishes your passion to precipitate matters; nothing would please him better than that you should marry me out of hand, so that all he has said to your uncle should be corroborated, and there should be a just pretext not only for your disinheritance hereafter, but for withdrawing his countenance from you on the spot.'

'Then let us gratify him,' cried Gresham, cheerfully; 'we are told, you know, to give pleasure to those that hurt us.'

'Yes, but not to ruin those that love us,' was her prompt reply. 'I always told you that you were endangering your best interests by bestowing your affection on such as I am. I shall never reproach you for withdrawing them, or placing them more fitly' (her voice slightly trembled) 'elsewhere. In any case, my resolve thus far is fixed—that you shall run no further risks on my account. If our union cannot take place without such a loss of your uncle's favour, as we have good cause to fear, indeed, indeed, George, I will never become your wife.'

'Very good,' said Gresham, 'we are still young' (here he

kissed her to prove it), 'and can afford to wait a bit. In the meantime let us be happy with one another.'

Considering the relative position they were understood to occupy in the family, this would not have been accomplished under ordinary circumstances without some difficulty; since, for the young man of the house to take solitary walks with the governess, and to converse with her in her native tongue for the purpose of isolation, is generally considered, at the best, 'peculiar.' But Lady Arden, always prone to take small notice of anything beyond her children and her 'symptoms,' was now consumed by the thought of her own wrongs and Franky's, and disposed to concentrate all her sense of misdoing upon a single offender.

The two girls, it is true, were sharp as needles, and had eyes to which all the attempted concealments of a *tendresse* would have been transparent; but then George was a great favourite with them, and had been always wont to have his own way, and they both liked Elise, who, so far from being a designing character, they took note discouraged her swain's attentions rather than otherwise. At the same time they were by no means without the social prejudices of their class, and might possibly have resented such 'goings on' but for certain circumstances in their own position, which at present it would be immature, if not indelicate, to refer to more particularly, than as a fellow-feeling which made them wondrous kind.

A student of female nature can always assure himself whether a woman has ever been in love or not, by watching her conduct towards any one of her own sex who is professedly in that predicament. There is a tenderness and sympathy in her manner (and especially if there are obstacles to the engagement) which scarcely any other circumstances elicit in so marked a way, and she will always put her shoulder to the wheel (of Hymen) with a will.

In old maids there are to my mind few more touching spectacles than this behaviour; it speaks of a dead love—or worse, perhaps, a lost one—upon whose grave, along with the forget-me-nots, grow gentleness and pity, and in which envy has no root.



It may be added that, in any case, Mr. George Gresham was not one to brook interference with his affections from unauthorized quarters, and if remonstrated with, even by Lady Arden herself, he would have replied, and not without some reason, that, however strong the arguments which might at one time have been urged against his love for Elise Hurt, they had now lost their force; for it was almost certain he was no longer his uncle's heir, if, indeed, he inherited anything; and that the incompatibility, therefore, arising from the difference of social position no longer existed.

Even if it did exist, it did not, at all events, affect his spirits; and when the spring came on and touched fair Halcombe with its fairy wand, it found George Gresham already 'May from head to heel.'

As to the other inhabitants of the Hall, if they were not so merry, yet the absence of Sir Robert, which they mourned with genuine sorrow, not unmingled in Lady Arden's case with a sharp and bitter pain, was greatly mitigated by the sense of freedom, of emancipation from the rule of Ferdinand Walcot. That of the Great Baba—who was now more paramount than ever—being tempered by love, was we may be sure infinitely preferable to it.

They were not without news of the nominal master of the house. Sir Robert wrote letters to his wife from time to time, which were duly read—for there was nothing, alas! of a confidential kind in them—to the family circle. His health, he described as still failing, but always added that everything was done for him that could be done, and that he was tended by kind and loving hands.

These expressions—which were evidently his own—were odious to her to whom they were addressed; and in her replies she studiously avoided any allusion to them.

Gresham, on the contrary, would have induced her to take some comfort from them.

'It is certain,' he argued, 'that my uncle does not write them to annoy you. Why, then, should he write them at all, save to keep up a resolution that has begun to waver, to assure himself of a fact to which a glimmer of doubt already attaches itself? If Walcot looks over his shoulder—which is quite as



likely as not, by the bye—the idea that such remarks will suggest is ‘Methinks he doth protest too much.’

This was also Mr. Dyneley’s view.

All theories about the actual state of Sir Robert’s mind were suddenly, however, put to flight by a letter from him, which arrived about the beginning of June; a part of the contents of which were singularly grave and ominous:—

‘As neither my health and spirits show any signs of improvement, I am about, under medical advice, to try the effects of a long sea voyage. As the first of a new line of vessels starts on the 6th from this port to Australia, without calling elsewhere on the way, we have taken the opportunity of securing berths in her. I shall have the great advantage of Ferdinand’s experience of this new country, and hope to write you from it a much better and brighter account of myself. Kiss the dear girls and boys fondly for me.’

There was not a word of remembrance to Gresham.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## THE HOUSE WITHOUT ITS HEAD.

PRESCIENT as the family at Halcombe were of misfortunes sooner or later to happen in connection with their head, this last tidings exceeded all that had been looked for in the way of evil. It seemed to them that if once Ferdinand Walcot should contrive to place half the world between Sir Robert and his belongings, he would be lost to them forever. The fact of Walcot's 'knowing the country' by no means gave them the satisfaction that it seemed to afford their correspondent. It would only give this man another advantage over his confiding companion, who far from home and friends, and perhaps surrounded by creatures of his brother-in-law, would fall more completely into his power than ever.

The cruelty of Sir Robert's withdrawal from them to so immense a distance, without one syllable of regret, was felt by Lady Arden very keenly, but to do her justice this feeling was swallowed up by her apprehension upon his account.

'Dear George,' said she, with earnest gravity, 'my mind misgives me about this matter more than I dare to express.'

'It is a most ill-judged proceeding of my uncle's, without doubt,' answered Gresham as carelessly as he could; 'but since he chooses this man's society, it is quite as well he should have it on shipboard. Mayne tells me it is enough to make a man hate his mother, to be shut up with her for a three months' voyage; and Sir Robert will see this fellow in his true colours long before he reaches Melbourne.'

'I am so glad to remember,' said Milly gravely, 'that Mr. Walcot is a bad sailor.'

'He is a bad everything, my dear,' observed Lady Arden, regardless of logic. 'He will end by murdering your poor dear Papa in the Bush.'

'My dear Lady Arden!' exclaimed Gresham reprovingly; but in his heart of hearts he thought this prophecy far from unlikely to come to pass. His views of Ferdinand Walcott, always far from favourable, had of late, perhaps, gathered corroboration from his friend Mayne's epistles, which were always full of 'Uncle Ferdy;' and for whom they had no epithet less strong than 'villain.'

'I have got my eye on him,' ran his last letter, 'and am watching him narrowly, though at second hand, like vermin under the microscope.'

But not a word had he said about this Australian project.

Under these circumstances, it was urged by Lady Arden that Mr. Mayne should be at once communicated with, and invited down to the Hall.

'He has been so friendly with us, George,' she said, 'and has taken such immense pains in this matter, that we cannot do enough to show our gratitude; and then it would be such a comfort to have his counsel at such a crisis.'

'But Mayne always says, Lady Arden, that he is under a great obligation to us for having given him a pursuit. And you see it is the London season, and it is rather hard to bring a fellow down to Halcombe—though I am sure he would be delighted—and——' and further than that 'and' Mr. George Gresham could not get.

The fact was he knew his friend would be willing enough to come, but that he would be restrained from doing so, from feelings of delicacy towards Sir Robert. 'I have no right,' he had written, 'ever to enter your uncle's house until the imputation that has been made upon my behaviour while under his roof has been removed. At present he thinks me a blackguard, and no wonder. His last words were to forbid me to speak with any ladies of his family. Of course this is all owing to "Uncle Ferdy"—here followed the usual digression concerning his intentions of 'making it all right' with that gentleman, and 'something over;' allusions to the 'return match' to come off at some indefinite date, &c., &c.—'but that does not alter the fact that it would be an impertinence in me to show my nose at Halcombe.'

Now Gresham had slurred over to Lady Arden (as well he might) the cause of offence supposed to have been given by Mayne, but he was not good at framing excuses.

'I think you do your friend wrong,' said she, 'in supposing that he would not give up the pleasures of society for a day or two to come and help us in our trouble.'

'I think so, too,' said Evelyn, gently.

Millicent said nothing, but blushed so very much that Gresham imagined that some story to his friend's discredit must have reached her ears.

'I think, under the circumstances,' said he, 'a line from yourself, Lady Arden, would have more force than anything I can write.'

'Then he shall have it, George,' was her reply.

Gresham felt the need of his friend's presence at such a crisis at least as much as the rest. The two young men had many points in common (it is curious, indeed, *how* alike young men of that type are) but Mayne's was the leading spirit. They were equally honourable, generous, and resolute; but Gresham was indolent where his friend was vigorous, and the latter had the keener wits. When to these circumstances of superiority we add the fact of Mayne's large fortune, and the power it conferred upon him, it is easy to understand how the other leant upon him. Dyneley, indeed, would have seemed to be the natural ally to whom the inmates of the Hall should have turned in this emergency, but respect for his patron (as they thought), or the knowledge that, however involuntarily, he had struck the first note of this domestic discord, had of late kept the Curate silent even on occasions when his advice was looked for.

As a matter of fact he was only too eager to help them by his counsel, but shrank from volunteering that good office, which must necessarily draw him nearer and nearer to Evelyn, his relation to whom he felt to be that of the moth to the candle. She attracted him, and very innocently, but (so it seemed to him) to his own destruction. Not that he was so modest that he felt it impossible she could ever reciprocate his affection, but that circumstances appeared now more than ever to forbid him to hope to win her.

It was improbable that at any time her stepfather would have listened to his suit, but now, when Sir Robert was already far from pleased with the family, his pretensions would be sure to be treated with contempt, and moreover would undoubtedly be used by Walcot to Evelyn's own disadvantage; and the Curate was not the man to injure another—far less the girl he loved—for the gratification of self.

On the other hand there were limits even to his self-sacrifice. He could not seek Evelyn's society, be intimate and even confidential with her; speak with her, take her hand, as a friend and almost a brother—with such far from brotherly feelings; it was more than he could bear, to be permitted to talk to her upon every topic—even tender ones—for she spoke to him of Gresham and Elise—save the very one which was always on the tip of his tongue, but on which honour bade him be silent.

Therefore the Curate was not so constant a visitor at the Hall as he once had been, when the field was less open to him, and Lady Arden perhaps a little resented this, which rendered his keeping away the easier.

Her letter to Mr. Mayne was answered in less time than by return of post, by the arrival of that gentleman himself, the cordiality of whose reception by Lady Arden and her elder daughter at once set him at his ease, and placed him in his old position in the family. Gresham had, indeed, assured him that this would be the case, and that nothing 'unpleasant' had transpired respecting him; but he was greatly pleased to be thus personally convinced of the fact. As to his transgression of Sir Robert's veto, he either felt that the circumstances were grave enough to excuse it, or Lady Arden's note, and his own wish to revisit Halcombe, had overcome them. Gresham, of course, had received him even more warmly than did the others, but there was still one whose welcome this exacting young gentleman missed. He so far forgot himself as to look round the room with an enquiring air—which Gresham was good enough, with a twinkle in his eye, to translate for him.

'You wonder why Dyneley is not here' (Mayne had mentioned having caught sight of him at the village); 'if you want him you must go to his lodgings. He doesn't visit at this house now, and is supposed to be a creature of Uncle Ferdy's.'

'For shame,' cried Lady Arden. 'How can you jest upon such a subject, George!'

'George will jest on anything,' observed Evy, with unwonted severity and heightened colour.

'That is quite my experience of him,' said Mayne, demurely. 'He has no ballast.'

Here Milly entered the room; she had been standing outside the door for full a minute, not listening at the keyhole, nor saying 'plums, prunes, and prism' with a view to getting a proper shape to her mouth; yet something like the latter she had been doing. If she had been a man we should say she had been 'pulling herself together' in order to enter the room with an easy and indifferent air. In this she was not very successful, for when one is indifferent (to the presence of a visitor for example) one does not blush and tremble, and murmur 'How do you do?' as though with the last failing breath of poor humanity.

Mr. Mayne, however, it was plain to see, was less critical than cordial. His happiness was so bright and clear that it reflected itself even in the grief-worn face of Lady Arden. Her mother's heart doubtless predicted for her a spot of sunshine in that future which until now had seemed all dark; but the next moment the present trouble, like a parted curtain, once more dropt its folds about her.

'You have come, Mr. Mayne,' said she, 'from a bright world to a very sombre one; nothing but the shadow of death itself could have affected us with a deeper sadness than the news of my poor husband. Do you think it *can* be true?'

'I am afraid, Lady Arden, I must needs corroborate it, from tidings I have received from another quarter.'

'Great heavens! To think of my poor husband, weak and ill, and in that distant land, with no one but a false wretch like Ferdinand Walcot to depend upon!'

At the sight of which picture, so often presented to her imagination, the poor lady melted into tears.

'My dear Lady Arden,' said Maine, gently; 'do not let us take too sombre views of what is no doubt a bad business. Your husband, I have good reason to believe, is not so ill as he imagines himself to be, and the voyage may be of real service to

him. Moreover, I have taken such measures as will prevent him being left to Mr. Walcot's tender mercies. An unknown but trusty friend will accompany him.'

'What! On board the ship?'

'Yes. A friend of mine is also desirous of trying the effect of a long sea voyage.'

'Oh, Mr. Mayne, you are too good! You have sent some one expressly to look after my dear husband! Hitherto I have not interfered with your kind offices—that is, with the material part of them—it seemed, somehow, that I ought not to be spending Sir Robert's money in keeping watch, as it were, over his own actions; but now that the peril is grown so serious and so urgent you must really allow me to defray——'

'Pardon me, my dear madam,' interrupted Mayne, gently, 'but you entirely misunderstand what has been done, and I am sorry to say credit me with much more than I deserve. My little arrangements have nothing to do with Sir Robert—that is, directly. They have been made, as Gresham will tell you, with quite another object. It is a personal matter between myself and Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, and concerns no one else—that is, directly. It has been some expense to me, no doubt, but then it is my only hobby.'

And Mr. Mayne smiled, and rubbed his hands together slowly, like a man who 'sees his way.'

'I understand your delicate way of putting it,' answered Lady Arden, smiling also, in spite of herself, 'but, after all, it is my husband's safety with which you are so good as to concern yourself, and I really must be allowed——'

'You can send another man after Sir Robert, of course,' put in Mayne, quietly; 'but as to interfering with my confidential agent, there is really no excuse for it. He has quite another matter in hand, though it happens to have a connection with that in which you are so vitally interested. Such being the case, I have brought down with me a collection of "Reports" I have received from time to time from the person who manages my little affair, and which may repay perusal.'

'Reports from Marseilles, do you mean?' exclaimed Lady Arden.



'From Marseilles and other places,' answered Mayne, coolly. 'They form quite a little biography of—of the gentleman I am concerned about from the time he quitted England. The manuscript has all the advantage of a legal document, being written without stops and in a gigantic hand, combined with the interest of a fiction.'

Later in the day the manuscript was produced ; it appeared to consist of several reams, and if nothing else, as Mayne said, should come of it, the employer of such a correspondent could never complain that he had not had enough for his money. The items of importance, however, were but few. The two gentlemen had accomplished their journey to Marseilles with great rapidity—indeed with surprising haste, since one of them was an invalid—and had afterwards lived at their hotel, quietly, but by no means in seclusion. They had occasionally dined at the *table d'hôte*, and had made acquaintances in the town ; one a fellow-countryman of the name of Marshall, who had been seized with severe illness on his way to Cannes ; he had been formerly known to Sir Robert, but Mr. Walcot was particularly kind and attentive to him ; another, a Mr. Grosvenor, who often drove out with them, another a Mrs. Wilmot, who held spiritual *séances* at her house near the Quai, &c.

Although, in short, Mr. Walcot rarely left his brother-in-law, he made no attempt to isolate him in any way. Sir Robert looked weak and worn, and was manifestly in bad spirits, but by no means gave the impression of being seriously ill. His appetite was small ; Mr. Mayne's informant condescended to explain that he had had a personal opportunity of observing this at the *table d'hôte*, but the rest of his budget had to be taken on trust for the present ; it was dangerous to commit details to writing.

Such were the heads of what the secret agent had to tell. In a subsequent despatch he stated that Walcot had taken passage for himself and Sir Robert for Australia in the steamer *Apollo* without the least attempt at concealment, 'though if that had not been the case,' added the writer, with a pretty touch of egotism, 'you would equally have been informed of it.'

Here was matter enough for conjecture and apprehension in the little household, but unhappily nothing on which action

could be taken. Only the long and serious talks that ensued had the effect of making Mr. Mayne's relations with the ladies more and more familiar, and himself more recognised as a friend of the family. Gresham, as we have confessed, though sincerely regretting the misfortunes of the house, was by no means inconsolable under them, or at all events without the means of consolation. Evelyn, though grave, could not certainly be said to be overcome with grief. The society of Mr. Walcot since his declaration of love for her had become so painful, nay abhorrent, that his absence was a welcome relief, notwithstanding that it entailed that of her stepfather also. If one could have looked into her heart, it was not *that* trouble, which vexed it most; though it was more defined and positive than any other.

Millicent was happy in spite of herself; in vain she reproved her own heart for its gladness and brightness at a time so inopportune, and under circumstances that evidently weighed down her dearest and nearest with a heavy sorrow.

Frank, though he had loved his step-father much, had feared 'Uncle Ferdy' more, and openly rejoiced in his enfranchisement.

The Great Baba made no secret of his satisfaction at the departure of his enemy.

'But you want dear Papa to come back, don't you, darling?' had been a question addressed to him by his fond mother.

'Ess: but not to bring back at wicked man with him aden: he must put him into the pit-hole first, and then tum.' The pit-hole being the grave.

All the young folks at Halcombe, in fact though they loved Sir Robert dearly, bore his absence with a certain degree of equanimity, the recognition of which disquieted them. To their tender consciences it seemed ungrateful to be thus at ease while their benefactor was in such dangerous hands, though it was his own choice that had placed him there.

Lady Arden alone was genuinely wretched; she now perceived that something more and deeper than her *amour propre* had been wounded by Sir Robert's preference of Walcot's companionship to her own; that she really loved this husband, who had thus withdrawn himself from her, as her heart misgave her,

for ever, and to whom, while he was with her, she had failed or fallen short in loving duty. When the sixth of the month came round—the date on which he was to sail for the under world, her sorrow reached its climax ; she withdrew herself to her own room and remained there for the whole day, save for one hour, when she walked out alone to the hill-top, and gazed with tears upon that ocean on which he had already begun his voyage.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

## PERPLEXITIES.

THAT one cannot have one's cake without certain drawbacks is well understood, and in the country, when one has been asked to dinner, it is necessary to make a call to acknowledge the obligation. Thus it happened at this date that Mr. and Mrs. Raynes came over to Halcombe in due course, and found things in very different case than on their last visit. They had of course heard tidings of Sir Robert's departure, but they had no idea under what circumstances it had occurred, nor was it very easy to inform them without betraying family secrets. Moreover, despite his good nature there was a certain inopportuneness in the presence of Mr. Raynes on the spot where any calamity had occurred, by reason of his grinning. It was not that he made a jest of sorrow, but on hearing what surprised him, whether grave or gay, he always met it with his mouth split. No sound necessarily escaped him—this was controlled by circumstances—though when he did laugh he laughed like a horse; but had one said to him, 'My father is dead,' he would have received it with the same look of amazed drollery as the intelligence of the demise of Queen Anne. As if to make up, too, for his silence or inaptness of speech, he had generally a quotation from Shakespeare handy, which under really serious circumstances made him appear only more ridiculous, and even affected, albeit he was one of the most genuine as well as gentle souls alive.

Lady Arden herself was not visible to this worthy couple on this occasion; they were received by the younger members of the family, who explained as best they could the misfortune that had befallen them. Mrs. Raynes, good soul, at once dissolved into tears and silence, but her more robust spouse, eager to comfort and most unwontedly loquacious, could not but think travel was the best thing for Sir Robert. 'When he

comes back,' said he, 'we shall see changes in him, no doubt, after so long a voyage; if he does not hsp and wear strange suits, we shall scarce think he has swum in a gondola.'

At this the young ladies smiled, with alien lips, as they well might, not in the least understanding him, whilst the poor gentleman went on to express his satisfaction that their stepfather had at least a friend with him 'of adoption tried, and grappled to his soul with hooks of steel.' His misconception of the whole situation was in short so complete, and under the circumstances so intolerable, that both Evy and Milly withdrew their attention from him, and left him to be entertained by his young friend Frank. Not a whit discouraged by this, the good man pursued his well-meant vein of consolation. 'Well, my boy, you have lost *your* dear stepfather—unexpectedly—for an indefinite period. The very same thing once occurred to me; *my* stepfather was snatched away from me, and even more suddenly, not by water, but by another element—the wind. He was carried away in a balloon.'

Frank, who had hitherto been but moderately interested, here pricked up his ears.

'In a balloon, Mr. Raynes! How came he in a balloon?'

'Well—he was—yes, a scientific individual devoted to balloon ascents. Not that he understood the management of such things, poor man, or he might have been here to-day. He went up on an occasion—for an experiment—with a donkey tied to the car.'

'A donkey?' Franky clapped his hands delightedly. He would almost have been reconciled to his present bereavement if he could have seen Sir Robert depart in so admirable a manner.

'It's no joke, my young friend,' said Mr. Raynes, reprovingly: 'I saw the poor man come down, and thought as lightly of it as yourself, for the spectacle was no novelty to me, only some idiot in the crowd cut the donkey loose before my unfortunate relative was aware of what he was at, and being thus freed from the quadruped's weight, the balloon shot up like a sky-rocket, with my stepfather in it.'

'But he came down, I suppose?' exclaimed Frank.

'Not to my knowledge,' returned Mr. Raynes, coolly. 'No one ever saw him come down. He is probably careering about "the viewless fields of air" (Shakespeare, my boy) at this very moment. He left his earthly friends ten years ago. Now your case is not so bad as that, Frank, so cheer up.'

Frank not only cheered up, but began to give way to such exuberant mirth that it scandalised his sisters, who promptly reproved him for want of feeling.

'I couldn't help it,' gasped Frank.

'I am sorry that my recital of the loss of a relative should have awakened his mirth,' said Mr. Raynes, in his gravest manner. And then he grinned, beyond anything, one would think, that mortal mouth had attempted, and took his departure.

'He is really too eccentric,' said Evelyn.

'His Judy, as he will call his Julie, is almost as bad,' returned Millicent. 'She told me—oh Heavens, here he is again.'

'One moment, ladies,' observed Mr. Raynes, putting his head in at the door; 'we were just off, when I remembered something—which may be of importance. We drove to Mirton this morning, and the postmaster, hearing we were coming to Halcombe, asked me to bring over this telegram; it is for Mr. Mayne. He is here, is he not?'

'Yes, yes; oh thank you.'

He grinned so that, as he disappeared, he seemed to have swallowed himself (like the cat in 'Alice in Wonderland').

'Let us take it at once over to the Manor Farm,' cried Milly; 'the three gentlemen are all together there, I know.'

'I think we had better send it across,' answered Evy. She did not wish to call at Mr. Dyneley's, nor perhaps that her sister should appear to seek out Mr. Mayne. In ten minutes the latter returned in Gresham's company, and with the open telegram.

'Here is strange news,' said he; 'one hardly knows whether to think it good or not. It comes from my agent, Bevill. "Sir R. and W. have not gone to Australia, they have sailed for England. Important. I come home by to-night's mail."'

'Then Papa is coming back after all,' exclaimed Milly, joyfully; 'he can be here to-morrow, can he not?'

'He is not coming alone, unhappily,' observed Gresham. Evelyn, too, looked very grave. Milly, in short, was the only one to whom this news brought unalloyed satisfaction, and that, as it happened, only for a moment. The next speaker utterly dispelled it.

'If Sir Robert is coming back, Mayne, I am afraid we shall lose you?' observed Gresham, forgetting the reason why he could not remain at Halcombe in the fact.

Mayne nodded and answered coldly, 'Yés, it would not be pleasant to remain under your uncle's roof, after our little misunderstanding.'

Milly longed to say, 'What *can* it matter, whatever it is? Do stop,' but of course she remained silent.

'I am sure, dear Papa will not take us by surprise,' said Evelyn, confidently. 'He is too considerate for that.'

'True, we need do nothing in a hurry,' said Gresham; 'we shall probably hear of my uncle's movements by to-morrow's post.'

'I do not think so,' said Evelyn. 'He would surely have written from Marseilles on this sudden change of purpose had he wished to inform us of his movements.'

To this no one had anything to say; the remark seemed somewhat inconsistent with that she had just uttered respecting the consideration of Sir Robert for others. And yet they knew it was not so.

'Of course it's all Walcot's doing,' said Gresham, expressing the general sentiment. 'I wonder what he does it *for*.'

'For some wise and good purpose, no doubt,' said Mayne unctuously; 'dear uncle Ferdy!'

'Oh, Mr. Mayne, how *can* you!' remonstrated Milly.

'My dear young lady, I have the warmest interest in the gentleman in question, I do assure you. I long to meet him, though it is true, not here. I am delighted that the ocean will not now separate us. And next to meeting him I long to hear about him. What do you say to my telegraphing to Bevill to come to Mirton, where we can hold communication with him without awakening the suspicions of the enemy? He will bring us the latest information concerning Sir Robert, by the light of which, perhaps, we may be enabled to see our way.'



Gresham and the rest thought this an excellent plan ; while Lady Arden herself made no opposition to it. She would not have liked the man to come to the Hall—it seemed like encouraging an espionage upon her husband ; but there was nothing offensive to her in his being at Mirton, where Mr. Mayne might consult him on his own affairs.

Practically, the difference was but slight, but in matters of feeling it often happens that as little suffices to salve as to wound ; moreover, the poor lady's curiosity to know what had taken place to change her husband's plans was excessive ; and Mr. Bevill would at least afford them some data to enable them to guess at this.

Mr. Mayne therefore telegraphed as proposed. In the meantime the family at the Hall remained in a very unpleasant state of tension, expecting, or rather apprehending, they knew not what, and exceedingly embarrassed by receiving no communication from Sir Robert.

On the first news of his change of intention Lady Arden had been very hopeful ; expressing herself confident that her husband had repented of deserting them (even if he had not emancipated himself from the influence of his brother-in-law), and was returning in all haste to his home. Even though Walcot should accompany him, such a result seemed better to her than his prolonged and indefinite absence ; and the getting things 'patched up' than a complete and, perhaps permanent rupture.

But as the days went by, and her husband gave no sign of his return, she began to grow morbidly anxious and alarmed. It was with some difficulty, indeed, when news came of the agent's expected arrival at the inn at Mirton, that she could be restrained from going thither, and hearing his story with her own ears.

In the end, however, Mayne and Gresham drove over thither alone, while Dyneley remained with her to administer such consolation as his presence and arguments could afford. The family distress had broken down his resolution to keep aloof from the Hall ; and his sober and hopeful view of matters acted like a tonic.

'Certainly, when one is in trouble,' admitted her ladyship, who had been no little aggrieved by his late apparent coldness ;

'there is no one who comforts one like Mr. Dyneley. Don't you think so, Evelyn?'

'I always thought him a very good man, Mamma,' was her gentle reply.

But if the Curate took sanguine views of the state of affairs, they were by no means shared by the other two young men; who being either less charitable, or having suffered more seriously at Walcot's hands, were ready to credit him with any enormity.

As they sat in the dog-cart together, driving over the moor in thoughtful silence, Gresham flicked the mare with his whip, and suddenly exclaimed, 'I believe the man means murder. He has got my uncle in some out-of-the-way spot, and is doing him to death, probably by poison. Else he would surely have written to his wife.'

'Men don't always write to their wives, my dear Gresham.'

'But a good man, like my uncle, who must needs know she is in distress and anxiety about him—he would certainly write if he could.'

'Not necessarily, if he is ashamed of himself,' argued Mayne. 'And besides, his letters may have been intercepted. I quite agree with you, of course, that Uncle Ferdy would stick at nothing on moral grounds. But he is not of the stuff that murderers are made of. He has too delicate a consideration for his own skin. His rule in life is material advantage, to which all his other passions are subservient. One would have thought, for example, he would have wreaked his revenge on Groad and Holm, who betrayed him; but he has taken no steps in that direction, from motives of policy.'

'It would be his policy to murder my uncle,' returned Gresham, 'if his last will—as I have no doubt is the case—has been made in his favour.'

'No doubt; and he would do it without scruple, but for the consequences. He is a man that weighs consequences very nicely, and never incurs a risk that is avoidable. To raise his hand against your uncle, knowing as he well does, what we two think of him, would be very dangerous. However, we shall hear what Bevill says about it, who is quite without prejudice. I believe him to be loyal to me as his employer; but he is not

troubled with sentiment of any kind, and would have served Uncle Ferdy himself with equal fidelity, if he had happened to retain him. That is why he left the Police, and set up on his own account as a social detective. He felt that his area of action was too circumscribed.'

'I should say, then, he is likely to find it some day still more limited—by a prison wall, for example.'

'Not at all; there is no fear of that. Bevill has a respect for the law, which he looks upon as an old employer. He would never hold a brief on the opposite side.'

'Still—though it is ungrateful for me to say so—I should feel uncomfortable in employing such an instrument.'

'I am glad to hear you say that because it leaves this matter where I wished it to be, solely in my own hands. When one fights with the Indians, one does not stand up in scarlet to be shot at in an open space; one has to dodge like them behind the trees. I have hired this gentleman to dodge *for* me. You have often noticed, doubtless, what a fine head of hair dear Uncle Ferdy has got. Well, he is a great chief; but I mean to have his scalp.'

Before the inn door, as they drove up, stood a stout and contemplative person with a straw in his mouth, whom Mayne at once indicated as 'my agent'; else Gresham would have probably taken him for a commercial traveller in the illustrated book or fancy jewellery line, to neither of which branches of commerce much encouragement was afforded at Mirton. So much of time he seemed to have on his hands, and so little to do in it; and at the same time so totally indifferent did he appear to the beauties of land and sea, which offered themselves to the gaze from the spot he occupied in sublime profusion. His hands were plunged deep in his pockets, though, from the contour of his figure, it was plain that they could not be withdrawn from thence without some difficulty. His hat was tilted on the back of his head and displayed a countenance like the moon at full, and without any greater vestiges of vegetation. It was the face of a fat boy, except for a few lines in it, which time had drawn about the brow and mouth, and expressed—if it expressed anything—a good-natured vacuity.

Even the arrival of his employer awoke but little vitality in Mr. Bevill. He extricated his right hand from its pocket, touched his hat with his forefinger, and cast one momentary but scrutinizing glance at Gresham.

Mr. Bevill never lost an opportunity of observation and never wasted his energies; he knew Mayne already.

'Good morning, Mr. Bevill; this is Sir Robert's nephew, Mr. George Gresham.'

'So I concluded, sir, from seeing him in your company; otherwise it would not have struck me.'

'You see no family resemblance?' said Mayne, laughing. 'Perhaps you think he is more like *my* uncle, Uncle Ferdy.'

'Same build, sir, but that's all,' replied the detective sententially.

'Not so clever, by half, you mean, Mr. Bevill,' said Gresham, laughing.

'Well, sir, I didn't *say* that. But even if it were so, you might be clever enough as cleverness goes. The gentleman to whom your friend was referring' (it was a characteristic of Mr. Bevill never to mention names; he thought it a bad habit, and besides the groom had come forward to take the mare) 'has wits enough for half-a-dozen.'

'You are bound to speak highly of him since he has outwitted Mr. Bevill,' said Mayne, lightly.

'Well, yes, sir, for the present—there is no doubt about it; he *has*!'

'Well, come indoors, and let's talk it over.'

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR. BEVILL.

MR. BEVILL, when not on duty, was of a retiring disposition, and had already installed himself in the only private sitting-room of which the little inn could boast. A low-roofed apartment, of small dimensions, and these encroached upon by a collection of old china, tropical shells, stuffed fish of truculent and piky aspect, and other 'curios' brought home by seafaring men of Mirton, and purchased by the landlord on easy terms. There was room, however, for the two visitors, who were about to seat themselves near the open window, when Mr. Bevill put in an objection.

'Under that window there is a bench, where the village folks sit, I have noticed.' (He had been in Mirton about half-an-hour.) 'It may not signify, but still it may. Our gentleman'—it was thus he always spoke of Mr. Walcot, just as Mayne applied to him the derisively familiar term of 'Uncle Ferdy'—'your gentleman may have friends here with sharp ears.'

'Your gentleman has no friends anywhere,' observed Gresham, grimly.

'Pardon me,' said Mr. Bevill, 'every one has friends everywhere—who has money.'

He closed the window, and pointed to a little table in a corner of the room, round which they took their seats.

'You have read my reports to your friend here, Mr. Gresham, I conclude?' (The word 'reports' was pronounced with a certain dignity that showed Mr. Bevill was capable of a weakness, and that it lay in the direction of literary composition.)

Mr. Mayne nodded assent.

'Good; then I will not trouble you with matters that are contained in them. My last statement, if you remember, was that Sir Robert was not, in my opinion, seriously ill. Within a few hours after I had written that opinion I had cause to

modify it. I came upon him in the courtyard of the inn, and I thought him looking very ill. It was the first time I had seen him since I discovered his intention to sail for Australia. Perhaps, therefore, his ill looks arose from mental causes; that idea occurred to me because our gentleman was walking arm in arm with him, and speaking in a tender and yet encouraging tone. He had, I thought at the time (but I was wrong) been persuaded by a stronger will to exchange all his old associations for new ones, and was, perhaps, already regretting it.'

If Mr. Bevill could not be said to talk like a book, it was clear that he was talking like a very carefully compiled manuscript—and, in fact, was quoting from it. His own ordinary conversation had nothing in common with this ornate and explanatory style. He was by nature plain of speech, as he himself confessed, but 'give him time,' and he would turn out some thing in the way of literature worthy of your critical attention. And he was very proud of this accomplishment.

'From the day when our gentleman and his friend had secured their berths on board the *Apollo*,' he went on, 'I saw very little of them. They kept themselves to themselves, or rather our gentleman kept his friend to himself, much more than formerly, and for one thing, they no more took their meals at the *table d'hôte*. It was understood that Sir R.'s state of health forbade it. As the *Apollo* was to sail with the tide in the early morning, they went on board on the previous afternoon; but, as I understood, they did not dine in the saloon. As for me, I did not wish to show myself to either of them lest I might be recognised as one who had sought their company of late (though I had been as prudent as was possible in so doing), and our gentleman should have had his suspicions aroused before starting. I did not wish him to know that Sir R. had a friend on board until necessity should compel the revelation.'

This last sentence Mr. Bevill repeated (under the transparent pretence of having forgotten it), with a roll in his voice that greatly enhanced the stately periods.

'I myself delayed going on board the ship until after dusk, and, when I did so, at once betook myself to my cabin. Before finally turning in for the night, however, I came on deck for a breath of fresh air, in full confidence that at such an hour I

should run no risk of encountering those whom it was my object to avoid. It was half-past nine, and the saloon passengers, who had been smoking and chatting above till it grew cold, had all gone below. I was about to follow their example when I saw our gentleman come up the saloon stairs with a travelling bag in his hand. There would have been hardly sufficient light by which to recognise him, had I not been on the lookout for him, and no one else; but as it was I felt quite certain of my man. He went to the side of the ship, and peered over it, into the semi-darkness. I did the like, taking care to keep myself out of his range of vision, and this is what I saw. There was a boat lying close under me, with Sir Robert himself lying in the stern of it, and just as I had seen him come on board, with all his portmanteaus, boxes, &c., in the bow. Only it was plain that he was now going away instead of embarking—I do assure you, for the moment, I was quite thrown off my balance. It was not what was happening before my eyes so much as the sense of what might and would have happened, but for my just coming up for that mouthful of air—namely, that I should have found myself bound for Australia for no earthly reason; doomed to I don't know how many months of ocean travel, without the least object, save to get home again, not to mention the money thrown away by my employer, and the disgrace that would attach to myself in having been thus tricked and deluded.

‘All this passed through my mind like a keen blast of air, but did not hinder me from seeing my gentleman run quickly down the ladder, jump into the boat, and seat himself by the side of Sir R.; the next moment the rowers had pushed off, and they were gone.’

‘And where the deuce were they gone to?’ inquired Gresham, impatiently.

‘That was the very question that yours truly put to himself, sir,’ said Mr. Bevill, breaking into his colloquial style, ‘and which, unfortunately, has not been answered yet. Of course, I was for following ‘em hot foot; but that was not so easy. When I asked for a boat to go on shore, the captain of the deck watch didn’t see it. He said it was too late; and that the next time I was put on shore from the *Apollo* it would be in Mel-



bourne harbour. The very notion of this turned me cold again, and I am afraid I found myself bidding higher than I should have done for the accommodation of a boat. The fact was, however, that the officer was afraid of losing his men altogether if he gave them such an opportunity of slipping away on the eve of so long a voyage, and in the end he consented to put me ashore himself for a five pound note, which accordingly I paid him. That's gone, I fear, from you and your heirs forever, sir,' here the speaker turned to Mr. Mayne, 'but with regard to the Australian passage-money, I am happy to say I recovered half of it, on a representation of the case to the Navigation Company.'

'That is a secondary matter, Mr. Bevill,' said Mayne quietly. 'Pray go on with your narrative.'

'I wish I could, sir, but unhappily it ends where I left it; our gentleman got clean away, though not, indeed, without leaving a trail behind him. He had not returned to the hotel, where they quite understood, indeed, he was on his way to Australia; and as I could not gain any information of his movements by land—which, since he was in charge of an invalid, could scarcely have been concealed—I gave my attention to the water. A trading ship, I found had sailed that very night for England, bound for Weymouth, and on inquiring at the office, I found our gentleman had engaged berths for himself and Sir R. on board of it, *as well as on board the Apollo.*'

'But for what possible reason?' exclaimed Gresham.

'Heaven knows, sir,—or, leastaways, more likely the other party. I can think of nothing else to explain it but that our gentleman had found out he was being watched, and was resolved to throw one off his tracks at any cost. Yet how he could have persuaded Sir R.—though, indeed, poor soul, he looked in that there boat as though he had very little strength to resist him—to change his plans so completely, and at such short notice—that baffles me altogether.'

'One thing at all events is certain,' observed Gresham, 'that their object is to hide away from all of us.'

'It is the object of our gentleman, no doubt,' replied the detective.

'Mr. Bevill has administered a just reproof to you, Gresham,' observed Mayne. 'It is no more your uncle's fault that he has adopted this strange course than that yonder signboard swings to the wind. He has not been a free agent for this long time, and now, prostrated by illness——.'

'Forgive me,' interrupted Gresham, earnestly. 'I spoke in thoughtlessness, not in bitterness, Heaven knows. The very thought of the influence this scoundrel exercises over the good kind old man——'

'Fifty-one,' observed Mr. Bevill, sententially. 'I heard him say so.'

'Well, well, when a man, even in middle life, subordinates his will to another, and voluntarily becomes a cipher, one thinks of him as old,' said Gresham. 'I trust my uncle will live many a year, but among those who love him. To think of this man Walcot, I was about to say, puts me alike out of patience and of reason. That is why you, Mayne, and Mr. Bevill here are such a comfort to me. The only plan that ever occurs to me is to take the scoundrel by the neck and throttle him.'

'The idea is too charming to dwell upon,' said Mayne, gravely. 'I dare not indulge myself in such luxurious thoughts. Besides his *neck* is scarcely private property. Jack Ketch has in a manner bespoken it.'

'I hope not, since that will mean murder,' answered Gresham, gloomily; 'in which case one can only too well guess the victim.'

'No, no; our gentleman is not of that sort, sir,' observed Mr. Bevill, assuringly. 'I know the class, and call them the Pouncers; it is always now or never with them. But this one, he is so clever that he don't pounce, but can afford to bide his time. He will never hurry matters in the way you are thinking of.'

'That is quite my view,' remarked Mayne. 'Nature, however, may make things terribly easy for him—his star has fought for him as it is beyond all expectation—and time is pressing. I do not speak of the future wrong that may be done to my friend Gresham and others, for that I know is insignificant to them in comparison with the condition of Sir Robert

himself, ill, and in this villain's clutches ; conscious, perhaps, by this time, of the true character of his companion, yet physically incapable of escape from him.'

'I see all that, sir,' said Mr. Bevill, slowly. 'The place for me, therefore, seems just now to be Weymouth.'

'By all means,' exclaimed Gresham, earnestly. 'If it was not that I fear my motives would be misconstrued, or rather misrepresented by this scoundrel, I would myself accompany you. What do you say, Mayne ?'

'I say "No," Gresham,' was the unexpected rejoinder. 'By Mr. Bevill's account your uncle stands in no immediate danger either from natural causes or foul play ; and I think it would be only just, before taking so decided a step as you propose, to wait a few days, in which he may declare his intentions. If he remains in England for any time—say a week, for example—without communicating with Lady Arden, or any of the family—we may take it for granted that he is under dictation. Whereas, if it is not so, and you or even Mr. Bevill (whom we have reason to feel Walcot already suspects of dogging him) should go down to Weymouth, it would arouse irritation in Sir Robert's mind, and retard, if it does not prevent, its awakening to the true state of affairs.'

'Our gentleman himself could not have looked at the matter all around more judgematically,' observed Mr. Bevill, in approving tones. 'Let us give him the week then, and I will remain here in the meantime till you say "Off," sir. If I get a few score of questions answered concerning him in this neighbourhood it may not be altogether time thrown away.'

Gresham looked from one to the other, with a half-consenting, half-hesitating air.

'This is your business, at least in part, Gresham,' said Mayne gently. 'Sir Robert is your uncle, not mine, and I should be sorry, indeed, if anything should happen—within those few days—to cause you to repent of following my advice. You will act, of course as you think right. But I must follow my own judgment in keeping Mr. Bevill for the present at Milton. Uncle Ferdie is too shy a bird for us to run the risk of frightening him. We have him now within reach, which is a great point ; but should we force him to fly away, things

would be made more difficult for us. Moreover Bevill's presence—and much more yours—might cause him to precipitate matters.'

'I put myself in your hands,' said Gresham after a long pause. 'They are stronger than mine, and fitter, I feel, to deal with such an emergency as this. Let our motto for the present be Patience, and if within a week, we do not hear from my uncle, I will take my own way.'

Whereupon Mayne said 'Agreed ;' and Mr. Bevill, 'Right you are, sir.'

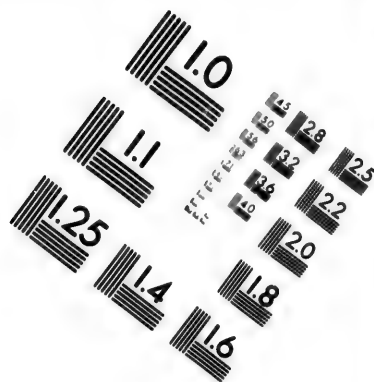
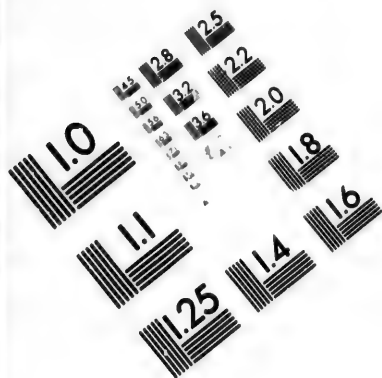
## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## A NIGHT CHASE.

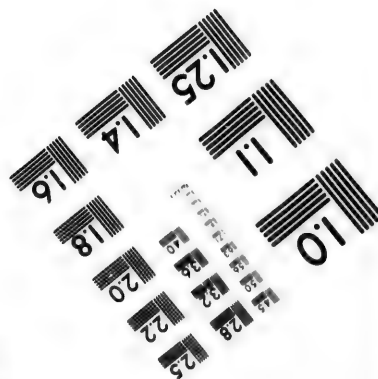
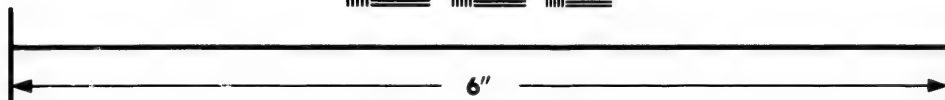
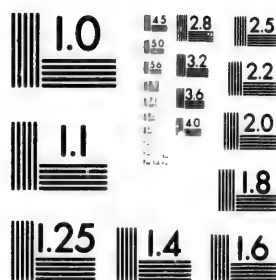
SIX days out of the seven had elapsed without any tidings from Sir Robert reaching Halcombe, and two at least of the little household were growing very impatient to discover the mystery that had gathered round him. It was with difficulty, as we have seen, that Gresham had been persuaded to suffer so considerable a time to pass in inaction, and to Lady Arden this passiveness was well nigh intolerable. To her Sir Robert's silence appeared absolutely unaccountable, except on the ground of his being too ill to write, or on that of his letters having been intercepted. To have suddenly changed his intention of leaving one hemisphere for the other, and then to have even returned to England without informing her of the fact, was an act of neglect and even cruelty, with which she refused to credit him. That he was not, morally speaking, his own master, was true enough, but no malign influence of a mere moral kind could, she felt, have induced him to thus behave to her. He must be under not only dictation but restraint ; or he must be utterly prostrated by illness.

As time went on, these convictions began to be more and more shared by the rest of the family, and even Gresham, notwithstanding Mr. Bevill's concurrence with his own judgment, began to doubt of its wisdom.

On the seventh morning, it had been arranged that the detective was to come over to the Hall to receive his last instructions, and so impatient were the two young men that on his not putting in an appearance immediately after breakfast they set out in the dogcart to meet him. They had passed through the Wilderness and reached the moorland, when they saw a horseman coming from the direction of Mirton, and at once concluded that it was he ; but on his coming nearer they saw that he was a stranger ; he had an olive complexion with long and

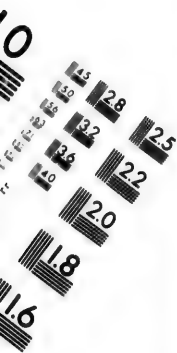


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pointed moustachios, and except that he had so good a seat on his horse, might have been taken for a Frenchman. He raised his hat, too, in a foreign fashion as they met, and then passed on. It seemed unlikely that he should be bound for any place but the Hall, and no sooner had they parted than it struck them that he might be the bearer of some message which might relieve the common anxiety. Gresham accordingly pulled and was about to hail him, when he saw that the stranger had also reined his steed and was turning back.

'Could you happen to tell me, gentlemen,' said he in broken English, 'whether I am on the right road for Halcombe Hall?'

'Yes, yes,' said Gresham, eagerly; 'have you any message for any of the family? I am Sir Robert Arden's nephew.'

'My business is with one Mistarre,—Mistarre—ah! *oui*—Mistarre Mayne.'

'I am the man, sir,' cried Mayne, eagerly. 'What have you to say to me?'

'Merely that I am ready to start for Weymouth,' answered the supposed foreigner, with a suppressed grin.

'Confound the fellow, it's Bevill,' cried Mayne. 'Why you would deceive the very devil.'

'I hope to deceive my gentleman, who is next kin to him,' answered the agent dryly. 'I thought it was inexpedient to come to the Hall in my own proper person; and now that I have met you I will, with your permission, not go there at all: it is better to be on the safe side.'

'But how will you get back to Mirton without being recognised?'

'A handful of water from the first pool and a twitch at these moustachios will make Richard himself again,' returned Mr. Bevill coolly. 'In the mean time I wait your instructions.'

These were soon given; indeed, they consisted mainly in impressing on him the anxiety that prevailed in the family, and the necessity of relieving it as soon as possible. He was to telegraph to them, though in guarded terms, every point that seemed of importance; and Gresham would hold himself in readiness to join him at a moment's notice.

It is a vulgar error to ascribe any great intelligence to the mimetic art, even when displayed in its higher walks; like the

business of the conjuror, and of the statesman, it is magnified by the majority of mankind, because they are necessarily unacquainted with it, but the effect of Mr. Bevill's masquerading was to impress both the young men with a sense of his sagacity, and to convince them that he would leave nothing undone through lack of strategy and prudence in the matter entrusted to him. When he had left them they began to feel that sort of complacency which we experience even under the most menacing circumstances, when we know that we have at least taken every precaution possible, and if things go wrong, it must be owing to the malignity of fate. And this feeling they imparted in some measure to the rest of the household.

For the first time for many days Lady Arden was able to listen to the words of wisdom that fell from the Great Baba with something like her old appreciation; for the pretty prattle of the nursery, though it never loses its music for the mother's ear, has, when her heart is sore and sad, a pathos that melts what is wax already, and gives to grief its hesitating tear.

With an inopportuneness characteristic of its age, the child, too, would generally choose Sir Robert for the topic of its talk, and this his deserted consort found intolerable.

That evening, however, Lady Arden joined the rest of the family (which included, it should be mentioned, that newly-joined devotee, Mr. Frederic Mayne) in their usual acts of idolatry; and the Great Baba, in the drawing-room before the late dinner, was more adorable than ever.

His brother Frank had a tame starling, and he stated at immense length how he too intended to procure a feathered pet, and by what means. Salt, as a device for placing on birds' tails, and so securing them, he had, he explained, hitherto found illusory; the birds were too rapid in their movements; but he (Baba) had observed [this with all the grave simplicity of a White of Selborne describing a fact in Natural History] that the goose was the most slow moving of all birds, and a goose he accordingly meant to catch, and put it in a cage to sing to dear Papa when he came home.

This statement, delivered with the most unconscious comicality, was supplemented by a request that 'Georgie dear'

(Gresham) should indicate upon the instant *which* goose in Gilbert Holm's collection he considered would be most eligible for this experiment.

In vain did Gresham aver with much emotion (he was half suffocated with suppressed mirth, and nothing made the Great Baba so wrath—except contradiction—as laughing at him) that he did not know one goose from another; nothing would satisfy the exacting infant, or induce him to retire to his couch until Gresham had passed his word that he would visit the farmyard and investigate this weighty matter that very night.

Out of which absurd agreement a strange event came to pass, which set many minds at work, and added the glamour of mystery to the gloom that already shadowed Halcombe Hall.

After the ladies had retired that night Gresham bethought him of his premise, which could fortunately be kept in all its integrity by the young men's visiting the curate, and smoking a pipe with him at the Manor Farm, as they often did. After an hour's chat and smoke, they were returning through the shrubbery, when Gresham suddenly stopped, and pointed out to his friend that, though the rest of the house was in darkness, there was a light in Sir Robert's dressing-room.

'But why should there not be?' inquired Mayne.

'I know Lady Arden has never entered the room since my uncle left us,' returned Gresham. 'And she told Evelyn that she never—Good Heavens! look yonder.'

'What is it? I only see three windows lighted up instead of two.'

'That is just the wonder of it. There are only two windows to all appearance in that dressing-room, though there are three when looked at from outside. The third gives light to only what is called the "Priest's Hole"—a hiding-place, no doubt, for the family confessor in the Jacobite times. Its very existence is unknown, except to the members of the family. One has to stand on the broad window-ledge, and open a sort of cupboard with a spring. Sir Robert keeps his private papers there, I believe.'

'Then it is probably Lady Arden herself.'

'No, no,' interrupted Gresham, hastily; 'don't speak, don't move. We must get at the bottom of this; no woman could have reached the place without great difficulty; see, that is a man's shadow.'

'By Jingo, so it is,' exclaimed the other. The head and shoulders of a man with one projecting arm, as though he were taking something from this secret repository, could be now distinctly seen. Then the candle that had revealed him was suddenly extinguished, and all was dark again.

'There's a thief in the house,' whispered Gresham, in great excitement; 'and I am sure it is none of its inmates. He must therefore break cover somewhere or another; either at the back or front; if you run round to the stable-yard, I will stand here, and we will give the alarm to one another. Walk softly on the grass, and—hush, listen! By Jove, there he is.'

The lifting of a window somewhere on the lower floor was distinctly heard, and then a figure dashed across the lawn within a hundred feet of them, and sped along the avenue.

The young men darted after it like two arrows discharged by a single string, and three pairs of winged feet broke the silence of the night together by their patter on the gravel. All three were good runners, but the stranger had two advantages over his pursuers—he had not dined so recently, and he was not wearing evening boots of polished leather. These latter were no obstruction to the young gentlemen's progress on the gravelled avenue, but when they had shot through the lodge gates and found themselves on the steep and slippery village street, their footing became insecure. They could not 'take off' from the toe, which is necessary to a very high rate of speed, because their boot-soles, save the high heels, became as unelastic as wet blocks of patent blotting paper. And yet after the first fifty yards they gained upon the flying foe. This, though they did not know it, was because they had youth upon their side, an excellent ally while he sticks to you, though at bottom always a deserter. When the supposed thief had reached the spot where the moss-grown stocks stood opposite the blacksmith's shop, his pursuers were flying by the village inn, and when he sped by the cattle-pound, they were racing past the stocks. This was a gain of full five yards.

'If Dyneley were here he would have had him by this time,' panted Gresham.

'We shall have him ourselves in ten minutes,' responded Mayne.

An interchange of ideas which cost them—that is, lost them—at least four feet.

At the cattle-pound the road turned sharp to the right and then to the right again, up to the moor, and at the first bend on the left was the bridle road into 'the Wilderness.'

They ran right on to the second bend before they discovered—by stopping and listening—that their man was behind them. He had taken the bridle road. This 'check' might have been fatal to them, but at this moment the full moon came out, showing each branch and leaflet as clearly as at noon-day, and also the object of their pursuit, straining up the grass-grown road a hundred yards in front of them. There was but one abrupt turn in this road, and then a straight run on to the moor.

'We have got him,' said each young fellow to himself, for bountiful Nature had just given to each his 'second wind,' and it was plain by his style of going that the fugitive had no such auxiliary. He had begun to 'wobble' in his gait, which is a very bad sign, and signifies, among other things, as I happen to know, that the runner is past his prime. They calculated, and with reason, though they would necessarily lose sight of him for a minute or so at the turning, that when they reached it he would be only half his present distance ahead of them. And they were right. Indeed he was leading by considerably less than fifty yards, but then he was on horseback. He had evidently left his steed tied up at this concealed spot, in readiness for some such emergency as had occurred, and the result had justified his precaution.

He was cantering away from them as leisurely as a railway train from a couple of cows, and they perceived at once that further pursuit was useless.

The young men flopped down on the wayside, and gazed after the vanishing figure, with gasps and gurgles. Their neat evening costumes were in a pretty state; their great coats lay somewhere in the mire, where they had thrown them, as a ship

throws over her ballast, anywhere ; their boots were split and sloppy, and they had run a mile from home at midnight for nothing. The first use to which Mayne put his recovered breath was to burst out laughing.

'We thought we were so cocksure of him,' said he, 'didn't we?'

But Gresham did not even give an answering smile.

'You saw that scoundrel pull up his coat collar as he rode off,' observed he, earnestly. 'Do you know why he did that?'

'No, how should I,' returned the other ; 'he couldn't have been *cold*, that's certain.'

'Well, he did it to escape recognition ; that was Ferdinand Walcot.'

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## BLACK NEWS.

THE astonishment which had been the portion of Mr. Fred-eric Mayne consequent on the events of the last twenty minutes was nothing as compared with the amazement with which he listened to his companion's last observation.

'No, my dear Gresham, I can't stand that,' he answered. 'I can only just credit that I am sitting here on a damp bank, with my clothes torn, after chasing a burglar by moonlight ; to ask me to believe that that burglar was Ferdinand Walcot is to overdraw the small balance of credulity I have still on hand. Let it even be granted that he should come to rob the house, in this inexplicable manner, I could still never be brought to admit that dear Uncle Ferdy could run like that.'

'As cowards will fight with a rope round their necks,' observed Gresham, gravely, 'so even elderly gentlemen will make use of their legs when to be caught is ruin. Of course under the circumstances—midnight and twenty miles an hour—I can't swear to the man's identity, but I am morally convinced of it. I felt it was so all along, but when I saw him pull up the collar of his coat, I said to myself no man but Ferdinand Walcot, being at his last gasp for breath, and with his wits shaken into a hasty pudding, could have thought of such a precaution at such a moment.'

'There is something in that,' replied Mayne, musing ; 'but why the deuce didn't you mention it ? If I had thought it was Uncle Ferdy, I *must* have caught him. Oh dear, to see him scuttle up the village !'

And Mr. Mayne fell prone upon the bank, to the still further damage of his dress coat, and roared with laughter.

'Yes, it was Walcot,' continued Gresham, meditatively, 'but unless we can get proof of it, it might do more harm than good



to say so. Moreover, it would alarm Lady Arden and the girls exceedingly, as to say the truth it does me.'

'How so?' inquired Mayne, quickly. 'Who's afraid of him? I would give a thousand pounds if he would only come again—just once—like a thief in the night. Indeed I don't know why I say *like* a thief—for no doubt he came in that very capacity.'

'I think so too, Mayne,' said Gresham, earnestly, 'and that is what makes the thing so serious. He would never run such a risk, unless for an immense and immediate gain. It is my conviction that some crisis has taken place as respects my unhappy uncle.'

'Indeed that seems very probable,' said Mayne, rising to his feet, and turning with his companion towards home. 'We may in that case hear something decisive in the course of the next twenty-four hours; nothing can be worse for poor Lady Arden than this state of anxiety and suspense.'

'We always think that till the catastrophe happens,' answered Gresham, gloomily: 'then we find the worst is to know the worst. I own to you, Mayne, that I have a deep presentiment of evil as regards Sir Robert.'

'Half the unhappiness in the world,' answered Mayne, philosophically, 'arises from presentiments—speculating for the fall, as Mr. Bevill calls it. For my part I am morally certain not only that Uncle Ferdy will eventually come to grief, and that I shall live to see it, but that Sir Robert will "enjoy his own again," as the song says.'

'The song, however, you remember was wrong,' remarked Gresham, dryly. 'However, it is well, of course, and one's duty, to keep a good heart. In the mean time silence will be our best plan as regards this night's adventure.'

'I quite agree with you, my dear Gresham, and not only for the sake of the ladies at the Hall. If the hero of to-night is really the man you suggest, and he suspects us of having identified him, he will expect us to take some important step, or at all events to make a row. Our remaining quiet will puzzle even him. Let us say nothing of what has happened unless we find any of the household suspect it, and in that case only describe our visitor as an ordinary burglar. Only we must brush our

own great coats, else old Parker will say, "They was very drunk last night, them two was, and fout on the ground."

There was no sign, however, that any one at the Hall had been aroused: the young men let themselves in as usual, and with their own hands drew down the window of the dining-room through which the supposed thief had made his exit. Gresham called his friend's attention to the fact that it was the same window through which in summer time Walcot and Sir Robert were wont after dinner to issue on to the lawn. 'He knew that it moved easily, and without noise.'

Mayne nodded acquiescence, and murmured something in admiration of Uncle Ferdy's excellent memory. Neither of them had much sleep that night. Anxiety as to what the morrow might bring forth kept Gresham's eyes from slumber. Mayne suffered from even a worse foe to sleep. The sense of the ridiculous oppressed him; 'to see him scuttle up that hill,' he kept saying to himself, and he had to stuff the sheet into his mouth to stifle his untimely mirth.

Nothing did happen on the morrow till its close. Late in the evening a telegram arrived from Mr. Bevill. 'The *Meduse*' (this was the trader from Marseilles) brought neither of our friends to Weymouth; this is certain. There were no passengers at all. I do not nevertheless despair of getting hold of one end of the thread within a few hours. If harm had been done I should have learnt it.'

The last two sentences, as all well understood, were put in by the detective by way of sedative. The rest of the message was simply astounding.

'He has killed him,' cried Lady Arden, clasping her hands.

'No, no,' said Mayne. 'It is his own influence that is dying, and he dares not trust Sir Robert to communicate with those who love him. That is why these extraordinary precautions have been taken to conceal their whereabouts. If any calamity had happened, at sea, for example, we must, as Bevill says, have heard of it ere this.'

'But where are they be?' reiterated her ladyship.

'Well, they may never have left Marseilles; their appearing to do so may have been a *ruse* to throw Bevill off the scent, I confess I think it unlikely, however, that he should have been

so hoodwinked. On the other hand, the captain of the ship may have been induced to touch somewhere, and put them on shore—at Gibraltar, for instance—before reaching Weymouth. For my part I feel no whit discouraged. The work has to be done over again, that is all. If they are above ground, Bevill will find them.'

Lady Arden shook her head. The phrase, 'above ground,' which Mr. Mayne had used suggested its alternative.

'He has killed him,' she repeated, despairingly.

This unhappy condition of his hostess disturbed the young man exceedingly; he reproached himself with having advised delay, and, by way of penance, resolved to tear himself away from Halcombe, and the sweet flower that bloomed there, and assist Mr. Bevill in his researches in person.

Lady Arden did not oppose this, for she had lost confidence in the detective, but, like the rest, as soon as Mayne was gone, she began to feel his loss. His good sense and sanguine views had acted as a tonic to them in their troubles, and when the doctor who had to be called in to her ladyship next day (as is the way in the country when such an opportunity occurs, 'just looked at' the rest of the family) he said, 'You are all running down like clocks, but especially Miss Milly.'

On the same night a telegram reached the Hall from Mayne, which fulfilled Mr. Bevill's hope that 'one end of the thread' would presently be in his hands, and also afforded some comfort. It appeared certain that Sir Robert was at all events in England. The detective had ferretted out a sailor belonging to the *Meduse*, and left behind—he was probably a runaway—when the vessel returned to France; and he had stated that the two 'gentlemen passengers' had been put ashore, at their own request, somewhere on the English coast. At what place the Frenchman could not tell, they had left the ship in a small boat, which had afterwards returned to it.

The next morning two letters were brought up to Gresham's room, that gentleman, as usual, being late for breakfast: one in Mayne's handwriting and the other in a hand he did not at the moment recognise. He naturally opened the former first. It detailed the news given in the telegram of the night before, but added for his private eye, if he should think it desirable to con-

ceal the matter, that the French sailor had described the old gentleman—doubtless meaning Sir Robert—as being deadly ill, which had been the cause of his having been put ashore with his companion.

Then for the first time Gresham began to apprehend the worst. With a certain quickness of action, that signified no eagerness (for he expected nothing), but merely impatient with Fate, he took up the second letter. To his amazement he found this to be from Walcot himself.

‘ May 21st, Salton Point.

‘ DEAR SIR,

‘ It is with the most poignant sorrow that I have to communicate to you the death of your revered uncle, which took place last night. He had been ailing, as his letters have no doubt informed Lady Arden, for a considerable time ; the doctors he consulted on the Continent agreed with his own family physician in the necessity of a complete change of air and scene, and at one time he had actually resolved upon a voyage to Australia ; with the caprice of an invalid, however, he suddenly determined to return to England by sea from Marseilles. On the voyage (we were bound to Weymouth) his symptoms grew so alarming, that I persuaded the captain to put us ashore at this place, where we have since remained.

‘ I more than once suggested that Lady Arden or yourself should be communicated with, but this he peremptorily declined to permit. Mr. Howard, his medical attendant here, a gentleman who tells me he was at college with you, and whom you will doubtless remember, had hopes of him so late as up to yesterday afternoon. But he finally succumbed to his disease—fatty degeneration of the heart, I understand, a mischief that has been long at work—at 6.45 P.M.

‘ I am thankful to think that nothing was left undone that could be done to save his life, or alleviate his sufferings. He could not, as I have said, be induced to see you ; but your immediate presence *now* here, is, I need not say, very desirable. I propose to return with you, with our precious charge—though alas ! what we so loved in him is now no more—to Halcombe, on the 26th, and have made all arrangements for that purpose ;

unless you would prefer a later date. I have purposely avoided the use of a mourning envelope, lest it should meet Lady Arden's eye, to whom it is your unhappy privilege to break this sad intelligence.

'I am, dear Sir,

'Yours truly,

'FERDINAND WALCOT.'

Gresham threw on his clothes, and leaving word that he was gone to breakfast at the Manor Farm, betook himself at once to Dyneley. He needed his advice, of course, but the hope that the curate might be induced to take upon himself that duty which Walcot had described as his "privilege," was the true spur that urged him. The young fellow was brave enough, and had given proofs of it; but he shrank from all things painful—and, to do him justice, especially from those painful to others; the ocean in its most furious mood was in his eyes a less formidable thing to face than a woman's tears.

While Dyneley read the letter aloud Gresham strode about the farm parlour, putting in his indignant commentaries upon Mr. Walcot's text.

'Did you ever read such a tissue of hypocrisies? His "poignant sorrow" forsooth, as though he had not counted on my poor uncle's death, and very likely hastened it! It is sad, indeed, as you say; but one's anger fairly overcomes one's sorrow in the presence of such duplicity. The idea of his pretending to be unaware whether poor Sir Robert had written to his wife or not when every word must have been dictated by him! Then his daring to talk about "our precious charge"—"though what we loved in him is now no more," pah, it sickens me! Of course, I will go to this place—wherever it is—at once; but as to breaking the news to poor Lady Arden—I really think, my dear Dyneley, since you are a clergyman, and if you wouldn't mind——'

Dyneley looked up with a surprised air that presently vanished in a sad smile; 'I will see Lady Arden, Gresham, if you wish it; it falls, as you say, within my duty.'

'Thank Heaven!' ejaculated the other *naïvely*, 'what a good fellow you are—I suppose, by-the-bye—only this man is

such an unconscionable rogue—that my poor uncle is really dead! If Walcot has only lied to us in this, as in all else, I would willingly forgive him.’

‘No, this is the truth,’ said Dyneley thoughtfully; ‘looking at it all around, I see no hope of its being otherwise. And mind you, though I share your opinion of this man, you have no right to say he hastened your uncle’s death. This is a dangerous thing to say, and, what is more, an unjustifiable one. There has, you see, been a doctor in attendance on him—do you know the gentleman, by-the-bye, as is stated here?’

‘Yes: I remember Howard: he was in my own year. A very honest fellow I should think, though (like myself) not over burthened with brains.’

‘A year or two especially in early manhood sometimes makes a serious difference in a man’s character,’ observed Dyneley musing.

‘That’s true: but I may say—yes, for certain—that Howard could have stooped to nothing, I do not say criminal, but underhand. What has been done—so far as he is concerned—we may take it for granted has been done on the square.’

‘Very good,’ observed the curate. ‘That is worth knowing: it corroborates so far my own view that we should be slow to impute misconduct to any one in this affair, without proof; but there is something wrong as to the date of this letter. It was written on the 21st, and speaks of poor Sir Robert as having “died last night;” and yet it only reaches you to-day, the 25th.’

‘Gad, I never noticed that,’ said Gresham; ‘it’s very queer, to say the least of it. It cannot surely be more than two days post, if so much.’

‘It is two days’ post, answered the curate, thoughtfully; ‘the envelope tells us that much; the dates 24th and 25th are on it; it could not have been posted then till two days after it was written.’

‘What an observant fellow you are!’ cried Gresham admiringly. ‘I should never have thought of looking at the envelope. Mr. Bevill now would set me down as a born fool.’

‘Never mind Mr. Bevill; though I don’t say that it is not within the bounds of possibility that we may still require his services. It is your duty no doubt to start for Salton at once:



I would go with you myself, but that I feel I may be of use to poor Lady Arden just at present.'

'Of course you will be of use; of the greatest comfort to her, and to the girls also. Evy has often said what a comfort you are, when there is real trouble anywhere.'

'Has she?' exclaimed Dyneley, eagerly. Then hastily added with a deprecatory smile 'Well, you know, we clergy are still believed in by the ladies: our experience among the poor is of use to us, for when there is real sorrow, human nature is the same everywhere, and the same sources of comfort——.' Here he stopped, for it was plain that his companion was not attending to him; 'What are you looking for, my dear Gresham?'

'Your *Bradshaw*: I've got it now; but, dear me, Salton Point is not in it.'

'I dare say not; there is probably no station there. I don't think I ever heard of the place. See here in the map—you must go to Saltonburg, and then drive over—it looks about six miles. You have just time to sit down and get your breakfast; and be in Mirton to catch the midday coach. I will send round the dog-cart from the stables to pick you up here.'

'Then you are going to the Hall at once—well, it is best to get these things over. I am awfully obliged to you for taking the matter off my shoulders. I say—you'll make it clear to *all* of them—I mean the girls of course (he was thinking of Elise, but dared not mention her) how it was that I went off without saying good-bye, won't you? Thanks. God bless you, old fellow.'

Then, as he sat down to his meal alone, he murmured. 'What a capital fellow a *good* parson is. I wish Dyneley could have come with me down to Salton Point. Poor old Sir Robert—he was a kind friend to me, in life, whatever happens, I shall never forget that. How wretched it will be down there; and with that infernal scoundrel in the house—Well, well; I must go through with it.'



## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## SALTON POINT.

THAT Mr. Dyneley 'did not know Salton Point' only proved, not indeed that he was unknown, but that he was of stay-at-home habits, or, at all events, had not travelled much upon the railways or the south coast. To every one that did so, Salton Point has long been a household word, and the place itself perfectly familiar, so far as the art of the painter can make it so. The locality in question had never, it is true, been made the subject of any picture in the Academy, or even in Suffolk Street or Pall Mall; but the pictorial advertisement of it displayed at all the stations in the summer months was such as, once having seen, no eye could easily forget. The scene was at once so brilliant, picturesque, and fashionable.

On a beautiful heath that contrasted strongly with the broad, bright border of garden flowers that Art had placed on it, stood 'The Point Hotel, Salton,' a palatial edifice, 'replete,' said the letter press beneath the picture 'with every modern convenience, and supplied with every luxury of the season.' One carriage and four, it was true was departing from its principal entrance, but then two were driving up to it full of expectant guests; those who were already its happy tenants were taking equestrian exercise upon the spacious parade in front of it; or playing croquet on its 'unrivalled' lawn; or endeavouring (in vain) to exhaust the resources of the establishment in the articles of open flies, garden seats, or arbours 'so happily situated as to views both on land and sea.' A considerable portion of the British Navy was stationed immediately opposite this abode of bliss, and the rest of it appeared to be coming up full sail to join it. The extreme proximity of the numerous bathing machines (each with 'Point Hotel' upon them) to these vessels of war, was, in fact (to the modest mind), the

only drawback to the attractions of this marine abode, and even that might have been a mere misrepresentation of perspective. The whole picture reminded you of one of Claude's, at least in one respect, that every object that a landscape could suggest was to be found in it, besides those (such as the bathing machines and croquet ground) which had turned up since the elder master's time. Moreover, the tints in which the landscape was portrayed were of the most intense description; never were skies more blue, never was sea more green—indeed I may say *so* green—as they were depicted at Salton Point. The British passenger is not, as a rule, impulsive (unless you abstract his umbrella), or else the attractions of scenery and climate as represented in this delightful picture were such as to have infallibly diverted him from going anywhere else, and taken him, out of hand, from the main line on to the branch to Saltonborough, whence a coach, with four flying steeds (said a supplementary advertisement) would convey him to the Point Hotel.

For George Gresham, journeying slowly by breaks and branches, as is the way with those who patronise cross lines, this picture, which began to meet his eye, late in the afternoon, at every station, had, of course, a special attraction. It was some sort of satisfaction to him, on his melancholy errand, to be thus assured that the locality at least to which he was bound was of a cheerful kind. It was nothing to him, of course, that the internal arrangements of the hotel were conducted in the continental fashion, or that 'the *table d'hôte* was second to none,' but these facts seemed somehow to relieve the gloom that in his imagination enveloped the roof beneath which his uncle had come to his end.

Gresham's first disenchantment took place at Saltonborough, where, instead of the Flying Coach, he found only a melancholy one-horse omnibus starting for 'The Point,' and on which, save for a humpbacked driver with a keen hatchet face, he was the only passenger. Lightly laden as it was, and level as was the lonely road on which it travelled, its progress was very slow. On both sides of it extended a treeless waste, on one hand consisting of rank meadow land; on the other of marsh, which presently became a morass, and eventually an arm of

the sea—apparently suffering from paralysis. It had hardly any tidal movement, and the very gulls that flew lazily across it seemed to partake of its stagnation. There were no vessels, save one huge collier lying on her side in the mud, like a sea monster in a fit; but several masts, or what looked like masts, stood up forlornly in the ooze and slime, as though, like human ne'er-do-wells, the ships to which they had once belonged had gradually 'gone under.'

After a few miles, the road itself, to avoid sharing a similar fate, proceeded along a causeway; but causeway or road, there was nothing on it except the one-horse omnibus which appeared to be journeying with the last man to the end of the world.

'There don't seem many people about,' observed Gresham to the driver, after a long silence; 'I suppose the season has hardly begun yet.'

'The season?' answered the other moodily, and not even taking the trouble to turn his head to his companion; 'oh! yes, the season's begun fast enough; we've nothing to complain of about *that*.'

'I mean the visitors at the hotel,' continued Gresham; 'they don't appear to have come down yet.'

'Yes, they have; more on 'em than usual,' was the unexpected reply. 'Last week we had twice as many as this time last year; now we've got our usual quantity.'

'They don't seem to ride or drive much, at all events,' remarked Gresham.

'Small blame to 'em,' answered the driver crustily. 'Half on 'ems dead.'

'Half of them *dead*?' repeated Gresham in accents of horror. 'There must have been an epidemic, then—what on earth was it?'

'I dunno: you must ask the doctor, Mr. Howard. Epidemic or not, we can't afford to have many sick at the Point, or we should soon have to shut up shop.'

'But I thought it was so healthy,' argued Gresham; 'the advertisement on the railway—'

Here the driver burst out into such a laugh that an old crow, the only living denizen of the landscape beside themselves,

rose with a frightened 'caw, caw,' from the ditch beside them, and sailed away into the gathering mist; for the dews were already falling.

'Oh! yes, the Point is healthy enough,' observed the man, after he had thus relieved his feelings; 'but if you think it like that picture at the station: oh lor! however, I belongs to the establishment; and you had better judge for yourself.'

And again he relapsed into taciturnity.

This idea of an epidemic, however, without at all alarming Gresham on his own account, had re-awakened his suspicions of Mr. Walcot's morality. Was it possible that, knowing of this visitation, he had wilfully brought Sir Robert here in his critical state, to fall a victim to the contagion?

'Do you really mean to say, my good man, that one half of the visitors' at The Point Hotel this spring have died there?'

'Yes, I do,' was the dogged reply. 'There was two on 'em in all, and now there's only one on 'em.'

Then Gresham perceived that circumstances or Nature had made his companion a cynic, and dowered him with that grim humour which is the ordinary mitigation of that calamity.

'I am Sir Robert Arden's nephew; it is to *his* death, as I suppose, that you have so unfeelingly referred?'

'I didn't mean no unfeelingness,' muttered the man in ungracious apology; 'though, of course, it don't put inn folks in any particular good temper when a party only takes his rooms to die in 'em; and I would not 'a said a word if I had known you was kith or kin to him. You are like the poor old gentleman, too, now I come to look at you. He was but skin and bone when they landed him, and as yeller as any guinea.'

'Then he was very ill from the first?'

sighed Gresham, whom sympathy on Sir Robert's account had rendered insensible to the compliment thus paid to himself.

'I believe you; as ill as ill could be. He only used the sittin' room (it was No. 1 on the first floor) for a day or two, and then took to his bed reglar. Now the other one—may be you are *his* nephew by the mother's side?'

'No, no; I am not; but I know the gentleman you speak of—well enough; what were you going to say about him?'

'Well, I was going to say,' said the hunchback, with a caution, aroused no doubt by the eagerness of his companion's tone, 'that the other one, *he* is alive enough; here to-day and in London to-morrow, and all over the place.'

'In London to-morrow?' repeated Gresham. 'Is he going to London?'

'Not as I knows on, though it's like enough. It's a way we have of speaking: here to-day and gone to-morrow—which is what happened to your uncle the Baronet. Ah! that was hard: to have a Baronet in our 'arrivals' for a week or less, and then to lose him altogether.'

'But when did Mr. Walcot go to London?'

'Well, the day after Sir Robert took and died. He had done all he could for him—that everybody says—when his friend was alive, and never left his side. But when he was dead, I suppose he thought he might be his own master (as he is everybody else's; I never knew so masterful a gentleman) for four and twenty hours.'

'I see,' replied Gresham, thoughtfully. He was wondering whether that time could possibly have been consumed by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot in going to Halcombe instead of London. It was on the night of the 21st that Mayne and he had their burglar-chase; and the date tallied with this.

'I don't think you'll find Mr. Walcot at The Point just now,' continued the driver. 'He has been waiting at home for some one—you, as it turns out—every day except that next one after his friend died, and now it seems he has given you up. At all events he was just going out for a sail when I started for the station, and I notice that the wind has changed, which will keep him out longer than he bargained for.'

There were two sources of comfort for Gresham in this piece of intelligence; in the first place the carelessness of Walcot in leaving the coast clear for him to make all inquiries at the hotel, in his absence, seemed to prove him innocent of foul play as respected his late companion; secondly it was a great relief to the young fellow to feel that he might take his last farewell to Sir Robert without this man's hypocritical presence.

As the last of the afternoon was fading into evening the omnibus deposited Gresham at the door of The Point Hotel.

This building, so palatial in its proportions upon canvas—or rather on the advertisement board—was in fact a four-square edifice of moderate size, without verandah, balcony or porch, to relieve its excessive hideousness. It was newly built, yet already showing traces of decay. The brilliant *parterre* of flowers, which should have separated it from the blooming heath, existed perhaps in pots in the autumn months; but at all events it was absent now; while the 'unrivalled croquet ground' was represented by a patch of mangy grass, on one side of the mansion, with three rusty hoops upon it, and a broken mallet. The 'magnificent parade' on which the carriages and four had been represented, with equestrians of both sexes caracolliing with such a sense of freedom, was there—so far as space was concerned; only instead of gravel it was sand. Indeed there was rather too much of space about The Point Hotel. Before it was the sea; on the right hand was the heath, on the left hand was the heath, and behind it was the heath. Not a tree was there to be seen anywhere; but only the heath and the horizon. That the hotel itself had been made the central object in the picture was not to be wondered at; for except a half-finished row of unoccupied lodging-houses there was no other building visible. A more depressing scene at the close of day, thought Gresham, could hardly be imagined; and in this house lay the corpse of his only relative, and to whom he was indebted for all he possessed on earth!

At the door stood the landlord, a pleasant-featured, bright-eyed man, whose foreign appearance had perhaps suggested to the composer of the advertisement that phrase about the establishment being conducted 'on the Continental system.' He had a napkin in his hand (being his own waiter), which he waved slowly before him, like a saluting flag, and he smiled on the new arrival as it is popularly believed only a French innkeeper can smile. And yet his name was Jenkins, and he was English.

'Welcome, sir,' he said, 'you have had a fine day for your journey. A private sitting-room, I conclude?'

'My name is Gresham, I am the nephew of the late Sir Robert Arden.'

'A thousand pardons.' The smile flew from Mr. Jenkins' face, and he threw up his hands so tragically that it almost



seemed he was about to apply his napkin to his eyes. 'We have been expecting you these many days—ever since, in fact—Dear me, what a melancholy event.'

'Can I see—the—the—' Gresham hesitated. There is always a difficulty to the sensitive mind in speaking of the newly dead.

'The late Sir Robert Arden, Bart., lies, sir, in Number Four. My wife will usher you there if you wish it, but Mr. Howard begged particularly to have a few words with you first. He is now in your sitting-room. Mr. Walcot begged that he might be at hand in case of your arrival during his own absence. Selina!'

A very stout, but by no means vulgar-looking woman—she looked like the housekeeper in a family of distinction, and full ten years her husband's senior—here made her appearance.

'If you will kindly walk this way, sir,' said she, in a hushed voice.

She leads the way upstairs to a sitting-room on the first floor, where a young man of Gresham's age is sitting by the fire (for it is cold at 'The Point' still) reading a book in the French tongue—doubtless a scientific work on surgery. With a natural modesty he crams this into the pocket of his shooting jacket as the visitor is announced, then comes forward with a grave smile of greeting. 'So glad to see you, Gresham, though alas on a most melancholy occasion. We have been expecting you these three days.'

'I only got Mr. Walcot's letter yesterday morning,' returned Gresham; 'there must have been some wretched mistake about it.'

'Mr. Walcot certainly wrote to you on the twenty-first,' answered the other, 'for I saw him direct the envelope. I am sorry for the mischance—for a certain reason.'

'What is that?'

'No matter, my dear fellow, that will keep. How well you are looking! You are not changed in anything since we parted at college, while I—I suppose it is being anchored so near the shore here in all sorts of weather—I have become a wreck this long time.'

If this had really been the case, salvage was certainly due to somebody, for Mr. Howard still presented a very seaworthy and



even taut appearance. For a surgeon in so out-of-the-way a spot he was very smartly dressed, and had a certain air of fashionable idlesse, though far removed from ennui. The whiskers that sentinelled his handsome face were exceptionally well looked after, and he had an admiring way of regarding his boots which revealed the dandy.

'I was right,' thought Gresham, noticing this, 'about my friend here, so far as honesty is concerned, but it remains to be seen whether that scoundrel has not made a fool or a tool of him.'

'My dear Howard,' said he aloud, 'I present myself to you as an old friend in sad trouble, who may need your help; at all events I must ask of you to behave towards me with perfect frankness.'

'You mean as regards what has happened here, and especially with respect to Mr. Walcot's conduct,' was the unexpected reply. 'Most certainly I will do so, and the more willingly since I have been requested by that gentleman himself to conceal nothing.'

'Why should he suspect you of concealing anything?' put in Gresham, quickly. 'Why should he have hinted at concealment at all?'

'Because he foresaw what would happen,' answered the young surgeon, with a smile. 'He knew you would want to pump me because you mistrust him. "Your friend Gresham thinks I am a rogue," said he, "because his interests and mine happen to be somewhat antagonistic, and he honestly thinks it. I cannot stoop to contest that point, but must leave you to judge for yourself. Only when he comes, for Heaven's sake answer all his questions without reserve, else he will at once believe that I have murdered his poor uncle, and that you have connived at it." I think that "and that you have connived at it," was a capital joke,' observed Mr. Howard, 'though indeed (he added, precipitately) all jokes on such a subject are out of place.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Gresham, gravely. 'Of course, my dear Howard, I have no fear of your having played into this man's hands—which, to say only the bare truth, are not clean ones: but are you sure—are you quite sure—that you have been so careful of the case that nothing amiss could have happened

without your knowing it, that your confidence has not been won, and your watchfulness lulled to rest, by this man's show of affection for your patient ?'

'I am quite sure, Gresham,' answered the young man, confidently. 'Everything has followed the course of nature—which is unhappily not always so satisfactory as some people would have us believe. Mr. Walcot was very kind and attentive to your uncle, but not demonstratively so.'

'Indeed ? And did not Sir Robert on his part appear "ate up" with him, as poor Lady Arden used to call it ?'

'Well, no, certainly not that. He seemed to be quite conscious of his care and kindness—which were unintermittent—but no more.'

'Then he must have found him out,' exclaimed Gresham, naively. 'That must have been terrible, to have one's pillow smoothed by a hand we know to be false.'

The surgeon answered nothing to this, but regarded his companion very curiously, as though he had been some physiological phenomenon.

'Ah, you don't know this gentleman as I know him,' continued the other, pacing the room with hasty steps ; 'he has played the very devil.'

'That is just what my people say of me,' observed Mr. Howard, quietly, 'just because I am not a success in life, as you may guess by seeing me down here. But I am not so very bad, I do assure you.'

'No, but then you have only injured your own prospects, not deliberately attempted to destroy those of others. You have not estranged man from wife, and kith from kin, for your own vile ends. By the bye,' here his voice softened, 'did my uncle ever speak of me ?'

'To my knowledge, never.'

Gresham bit his lip : 'Nor of his wife ?'

'Yes, he used to talk to himself about her, but that was when his mind wandered, and from what I gathered the lady was dead.'

Gresham threw up his hands. 'Poor Lady Arden !' he said. Then after a long pause he added softly, 'I think I will see him before this man returns.'

'If you wish it, certainly,' said the surgeon, rising, and lighting a bedroom candle.

'I don't *wish* it: I abhor it,' answered Gresham, with a half shudder; 'but I think it is my duty.'

'Very good; just let me pour you out a glass of wine. As a medical man I prescribe that.'

Gresham shook his head, and motioned him impatiently to lead the way.

'You will do as you please, of course, my dear fellow, but I should say, "sherry." You will see a great change—a *very* great change. We expected you, you know, much earlier.'

Gresham shivered, and with a gesture, half of impatience, half of disgust, followed the doctor out of the room.

In a minute or two they returned, and this time Gresham drained the glass which he had refused before. He was very pale, and his hand trembled as it carried the wine to his lips.

'I guessed how it would be,' observed Howard, coolly, 'it is often so with those who look on death for the first time. I felt something like it myself at my first *post-mortem*. This was a particularly bad case, for your poor uncle suffered from a complication of maladies, though the immediate cause of his decease was, as Walcot told you, fatty—Hullo, here is Mr. Walcot.'

## CHAPTER XL.

## AT THE INN.

NEITHER of the young men had heard Mr. Walcot's step in the passage, or his hand on the door, yet there he stood in the middle of the room, with his keen face fixed on Gresham. He was dressed in rough sailor garb, having just landed from the sailing boat, and it contrasted strangely with the delicacy, nay, almost the effeminacy of his features. His cheeks, for all the buffeting of the wind, showed no trace of colour; and the tone of his first words, 'So you have come at last, Mr. Gresham,' although somewhat reproachful, was as gentle as a woman's.

'I started as soon as I got your note, which was this morning,' answered Gresham, coldly, and without taking the least notice of the other's outstretched hand. 'Its delay is unaccountable to us.'

'Not more so than it is to me,' was the calm reply. 'I think you saw me write it and post it also, Mr. Howard.'

'Yes, by Jove, and so I did,' said the surgeon, quickly. 'I had forgotten about the posting, but now I remember you dropped it in the box in my presence, and remarked on the time it would take to reach Halcombe.'

'The envelope was dated Salton 24th,' observed Gresham, coldly. 'As it happens, I brought it with me, and here it is.'

'That is curious, indeed,' said Walcot, examining it. 'The only explanation possible is that it must have stuck in the box: these country postmasters are so careless. However, unhappily, haste could not have mended matters.'

Gresham turned upon his heel, and poked the fire. It made him mad to hear this man discourse so oilily, and the more so because the oil allowed no chance of friction; if he would only say something he could 'take hold of,' that would have given

him the opportunity to exhibit the contempt that consumed him !

While his back was turned Walcot cast a glance of interrogation at the surgeon, who replied to it with a significant nod. Then he went on still lower and more gentle tones. 'Have you taken your friend, Mr. Howard, to pay his last sad visit to——'

'Yes, yes, I have,' said Howard, hastily, 'it is not necessary to refer to that.'

'Just so ; I have ventured in your absence, Mr. Gresham, to take all necessary steps with regard to our proposed sad journey to-morrow—if to-morrow suits you.'

'Of course it does,' answered Gresham, with irritation ; 'the sooner we get away from this hateful place the better. Why did you ever bring him to it ?'

'Because otherwise he would have died on board the *Meduse*,' answered Walcot, calmly.

'My uncle was well enough when he left Halcombe.'

Mr. Walcot smiled a pitying smile, and looked at Mr. Howard as though he would say, 'Did I not tell you so ?'

'I am bound to say, Gresham,' said the young surgeon, in answer to his silent appeal, 'that your uncle must have been very far from well at the date you speak of. He must have had in fact the seeds of death in him for many months.'

Here the landlord came in to lay the cloth for dinner.

'It is a fine night after all, gentlemen,' he said, in chirpy tones ; 'and there will be a lovely moon. Salton by moonlight is much admired, is it not, Mr. Howard ?'

'It looks better than by daylight,' answered that gentleman unsympathetically ; 'but best of all, to my thinking, in a fog.'

'Dear me,' said the landlord, 'now that's curious. Though indeed I have known some who say "Give them a downright wet day." We have a piano in the house, you must know, sir,' turning to Gresham, 'and Mrs. Jenkins has, it is thought, a pretty touch ; and there is my museum. A bat that I caught with my own hands on the terrace ; a lamb with two heads born in the immediate neighbourhood ; some beautiful specimens of dried frogs from Salton marsh. All the fauna of the locality in short, as Mr. Howard is so good as to call them——'

Here is the wine *carte*, gentlemen. I would venture to recommend our 'ock.'

'If you mean your beef, Mr. Jenkins, there is nothing to be said against it,' said Howard smiling; 'but it is no use your looking at me for a recommendation of white vinegar. It is against my professional principles, unless I have a commission.'

'Mr. Howard will always have his joke,' explained the landlord.

'Bring some champagne,' said Walcot, curtly; 'and remember that we wish to see the cork.'

'You'll be sure to *taste* it, at all events,' observed Howard; he was doing his best to dissolve the gloom of the little party, but by no means with the desired effect. He was the only one of the three who did justice to the entertainment, which was of the usual British-inn description: soles, a leg of lamb, and apple tart.

Directly it was concluded, Gresham rose with a sigh and left the room.

Walcot looked up with the same look of inquiry as he had worn before.

'Do not fear,' said Howard, assuringly. 'He has had quite enough of *that*, poor fellow. You were quite right to put me on my guard. He turned as white as a woman when she sees blood.'

'Poor fellow,' said Walcot, pityingly. 'You must never mention to him what I told you. It would wound his *amour propre*; and besides, he would resent above all things my appearing to take any interest in him. His prejudices are beyond belief.'

'That is only to be expected,' said Howard, coolly helping himself to champagne (they had had no other wine); 'given a super-sensitive nature, and all these things follow in their proper places. It is a pity in Gresham's case, for he is an excellent fellow. At college—where I was, however, two years his senior—he was a general favourite, and deservedly so.'

'No doubt,' said Walcot, coldly. 'His uncle, however, had a great dislike to him.'

'Ah, *his* nature, perhaps, was also super-sensitive.'

'Very much so,' said Mr. Walcot.

In the mean time the subject of this talk had gone out upon the heath with his cigar. The presence of Walcot was intolerable to him, but so soon as he had left it he ceased to think of the man. He paced the silent desolate heath which under the moon's radiance, and fringed by the silver of the wave, was not without its grace, and even grandeur, with unwonted thoughts of death; it was rare for him (as for most of us) to dwell on such a topic, but the place, and circumstance, and time, all tended to draw his mind in that direction. He did not think of the Hereafter, nor even of death in its general or philosophical aspects: that is not the manner of such men; but only of the dead man lying near him. What a sad end it was, and how wholly unexpected, that one of such a gentle nature, made to be loved by his fellow creatures, and who had been loved by some of the best of them, should have perished *here* among strangers save for one familiar, but false friend! All the dead man's past kindnesses, from the 'tips' he had given him as a school-boy, to the hopes which he had once expressed in him—it had been on his going to Germany after the Cambridge *fiasco*—as the last of all his kin—rose up before Gresham, one by one, and made appeal, as it were, for his uncle's memory against harsh judgment. Sir Robert might have shaken the very dust from his feet on leaving Halcombe; he might have elected—nay it was too likely that he did so—to become henceforth a stranger to his own belongings, for the sake of this worthless scoundrel who had so fooled him, and it might be that he had made such dispositions in his will that all who were really worthy of his remembrance, or had a natural claim to it, were left out in the cold, to the advantage of this scheming villain. If that should be the case—and notwithstanding that if it were so, Gresham's once smiling future would be dark and cheerless indeed—the young fellow now made up his mind that no feeling of bitterness should take root within him. He would think of Sir Robert as he had been in the good old time, and he would set down any harshness or injustice, not to his hand at all, but to the alien fingers that had guided it.

To have arrived at this conclusion may seem to some excellent people to have been no great virtue after all; they may argue that, since Sir Robert might have done as he liked with



his own, the young man had no cause to feel aggrieved. This, however, was not quite the case. Gresham had been brought up in habits of luxury and idleness in view of his great expectations, and should these have been withdrawn from him—he had a very strong presentiment that they had been so—he had certainly good reason to complain. Moreover, to the eye of youth its grievances seem large, while what of good befalls it—and especially if it is past good—is taken as a matter of course. Whatever misfortune was hanging over Gresham's head, it must also be remembered, threatened that of his Elise also in her relation to him. So that upon the whole the young man's resolution was commendable. The effect of it was to send him back to the hotel with a less heavy heart than he had left it, but with by no means a more mollified mind as respected Mr. Ferdinand Walcot: indeed, in acquitting his uncle his indignation rose higher than ever against this man, who had done his best—though happily in vain—to make him not only a pauper, but an ingrate.

In the doorway of the hotel stood a man with a cigar, and Gresham took another turn on 'the Parade' for fear it should be his enemy. Presently the man came out, and he saw it was a stranger, in a black suit: 'it is one of the people that are engaged for that horrible journey to-morrow,' he said to himself, not without a shudder. Then, ashamed of his weakness, he walked up to him. A big, burly man, with bushy whiskers, and a red face, which the light from his cigar made redder.

'A fine night.'

'Yes, sir, very fine,' answered the other: 'it's a keen air though from the sea. What do you say to a glass of "hot with?"'

In a general way Gresham would have certainly said 'No,' and very decidedly. He didn't like 'liberties' in the lower classes, but at that moment he heard Walcot's voice at the open window above them, speaking no doubt to Howard, and even the society of an undertaker's man was preferable to his.

'I don't mind if I do,' he said; and the other led the way into the coffee-room. It was a large apartment, very barely furnished; and on its wall, for single ornament, bore an immense plan of Salton Point, divided into building plots, and

with a number of striking edifices upon it, including a clubhouse, a church, and a skating rink.

'It may be a lively place when all that happens,' said the stranger, pointing to this work of the imagination, 'but at present it's dull; deuced dull.'

The landlord appeared and supplied them with what was wanted, without a glance of recognition at Gresham. It was a pleasing fiction of his own that the coffee-room waiter was quite another person from the other waiters, who again were wholly disconnected, except in their business relations, from the landlord—albeit they were all one and himself.

'As if it wasn't dull enough already,' pursued the stranger, when they were left alone, 'there has been a death here.'

'I know it,' answered Gresham, curtly.

'Have you seen him?'

'Seen who?' inquired the young man, in a tone of ill-suppressed disgust.

'The dead man. *Your* uncle.'

'Why, bless my soul, it's you, Bevill!' exclaimed Gresham, eagerly.

He was surprised, of course, but very well pleased to find himself in the companionship of a friend—or one who, under the circumstances, was no bad substitute for such. 'Why I thought you was an undertaker's man.'

'No; I am in the commercial line, just now. It is not, however, a good place for business; so I have spent my leisure since yesterday in looking about me. It's a queer place to bring a friend to die in.'

'Yes, indeed. Do you really suspect anything?'

'You mean with regard to "my gentleman?" Well, of course, one suspects; but there is nothing to go upon, so far as I can find out. Sir Robert is dead, that's certain. You say you saw him yourself?'

'Yes. I went into the room ——'

'Ah, well, he was there, that is the point. The doctor, too, has not been got at; you feel pretty sure of that?'

'I feel *certain*,' answered Gresham; 'he has been deceived; however, by Walcot; takes him for an honest man, and thinks I am unjustly prejudiced against him——'

'Of course,' interrupted Mr. Bevill.

'But there has been no foul play as regards my uncle's death.'

Mr. Bevill nodded adhesion.

'There is *something* queer, nevertheless,' he said. 'My gentleman gave out that he went to London on Tuesday; it seems, however, he went to Halcombe.'

'Ah! I felt sure I recognised him that night. Mayne has come over to my opinion, then.'

'Well, I have, at all events, sir,' returned the detective, drily. 'My gentleman bought his ticket for London; but at Nottly Junction he took the down train. That was stupid in a man like him. The ticket clerk at Nottly was naturally surprised at the waste of fare; and it gave him something to talk about.'

'But I don't see, after all, how this affects Walcot'

'Nor I, directly, sir. But it shows duplicity; and duplicity,' here the moralist stroked one of his false whiskers, 'always shows that there is mischief somewhere. I have no more notion than Mr. Howard up yonder what my gentleman has been up to, but that he has been up to *something*—queer, and not upon the square—I'm *certain*. His story was quite true about your uncle's illness necessitating their being put ashore here by the *Meduse*—that was confirmed by one who sent me here; it is somewhere farther back that we must look for the kink in it; but kink there *is*.'

'That knowledge will be but cold comfort to those he has robbed, Mr. Bevill,' remarked Gresham.

'Quite true, sir; *quite* true. It will not be so solacing, nor yet so warm as this here whisky punch; but still it will be something to come and go upon. Now Mr. Mayne, *he's* not unreasonable; so long as he cries quits with my gentleman sooner or later, he says he shall be satisfied; and quits he shall cry. We can't raise the dead, sir—no; but we may so contrive it that the living shall, at last, have their deserts.'

'I am glad you are so hopeful, Mr. Bevill.'

'Hopeful ain't the word, sir; it is unequal to the situation. The right word is "*certain*." I am *certain* sure.'

## CHAPTER XLI.

## THE WILL.

THE day looked forward to with such abhorrence by George Gresham has come to an end at last, and others almost as sad have succeeded it. The body of Sir Robert Arden has been brought to Halcombe, and laid in the family vault under the church upon the hill. His widow, though bowed down by trouble upon trouble, shows a braver front than had been expected of her, thanks to the presence of Ferdinand Walcot. If he came hoping to see her in humiliation, or moved by passionate discontent, he was disappointed, though to say truth there is as little sign about him of triumph as of self-vindication. His voice is softer than ever, his manners have less of the master about them than of old ; but this may be his tribute to the occasion. If there is any effort in his behaviour, it is an effort to be his old self, unchanged by the new prosperity which all suspect, and he must surely know, awaits him. But to Lady Arden the spectacle of this man in the house he has made desolate is as the poison to the Pontian king ; it does her more good than harm. It prevents her from giving way to her calamities. To a certain extent, and while she endures his hateful presence, her anger has cast out her grief. In her eyes he is not only the murderer of her husband, but the wretch who destroyed his love for her. Like Gresham, she feels no indignation against the dead, but nourishes a fury which is almost sublime in its intensity against him who perverted a noble nature to his own foul uses. She is powerless to avenge herself, but she does what she can to show her hate.

For example, she caused Frederick Mayne to be telegraphed for to attend Sir Robert's funeral, which, she knew, would be wormwood to her enemy. It was as much as to say, 'I ask to my late husband's roof, and to bear his pall, the man against whom you turned his heart by fraud,' which she took for granted

without knowing how he had turned it. Mayne came, of course; and at the inn at Mirton arrived on the same day two gentlemen with rods and lines and creels, ostensibly to fish the moorland streams, one of them, Mr. Sturt, a lawyer, a stranger to those parts, the other, Mr. Bevill, and with these Mr. Mayne held daily communication. Within twenty-four hours Walcot was aware of their arrival, and of their object, of which he spoke quite openly to the family lawyer, Mr. Hayling, of Archester.

'Never,' he complained with bitterness, 'was a man placed in a more unpleasant position than I am, nor more unjustly. I am suspected by Lady Arden herself of—I know not what indeed—but at the least of having obtained undue influence over her late husband. She invites to his roof a man who he himself compelled to quit it for gross misconduct, simply because the information on which he did so, she knows, was furnished by myself. And then she connives at spies being located in the neighbourhood. I think, sir, I am very hardly used.'

Mr. Hayling, a country lawyer of the old school, with three yards of white cravat, bowed stiffly; it was not a sympathising bow; it seemed at the most to say, 'No doubt yours is an unpleasant position.'

'However, sir,' continued Mr. Walcot, 'I have the satisfaction of feeling I have done my duty by my dead friend and brother-in-law, and have nothing to reproach myself with; that is some compensation.'

'And there are others,' observed the lawyer, drily.

This was base ingratitude, for in that very will to which Mr. Hayling thus referred—and which was now in his own keeping—there was a bequest of one hundred pounds to him, which was solely owing to Mr. Walcot's suggestion.

It was clear that the lawyer could not be counted upon as an ally; while all the rest were in open enmity with him. Nothing but the mere decencies of life, in fact, prevented Mr. Ferdinand Walcot from being addressed as Scoundrel, Liar, Thief, by every member of the family, or their friends, which for a person of 'acute sensibility of mind,' as Mr. Walcot had often described himself to be, was certainly deplorable.

I have noticed that something very similar occasionally occurs to some very clever fellows, whom all the world acknowledges to have achieved a great success in life ; and it seems to me to detract both from the cleverness and the success. Still, in both cases, the spoils remain with the conqueror ; and in the one under consideration these were very large.

When the will was read in the great dining-room of Halcombe, a scene took place which made some congratulate themselves that the young ladies of the household had thought proper to absent themselves from that transaction.

There were present, the widow, who sat in the bay window and in the very chair which had been Sir Robert's favourite seat, and fronting the same home-view that had so often pleased his eye ; close to her stood his next-of-kin, George Gresham, with his hand resting on the back of her chair—they had been fast friends when their interests had been apparently antagonistic, and now that they were both about to suffer material loss (as they felt certain) they were no less drawn together ; Frederic Mayne stood by the chimney-piece with his elbow on it, and his gaze fixed sternly, and it must be owned somewhat offensively, upon Mr. Walcot, who now and again repaid him with a glance of contempt, but for the most part remained with folded arms throughout the ceremony, and with eyes bent upon the floor.

Between these two men the Curate had placed himself, doubtless by accident, though it seemed no inappropriate position for one whose calling was that of peacemaker ; his countenance alone bore no trace of resentment, but only wore the gloom befitting one who has lost a dear and kindly friend.

Even in the lawyer's case, a certain sternness mingled with his usual gravity of demeanour, which bespoke his distaste for the task before him.

'One moment, Mr. Hayling,' interposed Gresham, ere he began to read ; 'may I ask how that document came into your hands ?'

'Most certainly you may, Mr. Gresham ; it was placed there by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, here present.'

'And from whom did he receive it ?'

'I received it from the late Sir Robert Arden during his last illness,' observed Walcot, perceiving that the lawyer looked towards him for a reply.

'No,' said Lady Arden, in a sharp, firm voice. 'It was placed, as were all my husband's private papers, in the secret cupboard in the window-seat of his dressing-room.'

'His other papers may have been placed there, Lady Arden' answered Walcot, gently; 'but you are mistaken as to this one, I do assure you.'

'She is *not* mistaken,' exclaimed Gresham. 'It is you who have lied. With my own eyes I saw you take it out of the window-seat on the 22nd of last month, just ten days ago, at midnight.'

For an instant Walcot's presence of mind deserted him; the colour which Lady Arden's speech had called into his cheek suddenly fled, leaving them of a livid paleness.

'I was at Salton Point—no, in London—on the date you mention,' exclaimed he, defiantly.

'You were not,' replied Gresham, curtly; 'you came here to get possession of that will—with what object I know not, except that, judging others by yourself, you may have thought we should destroy it. You came, like a thief in the night; but I saw you, from the lawn, abstract it from its hiding-place.'

'I saw him also,' observed Mayne. 'At the time I did not recognise the thief. Now I have no doubt of his identity: one has only to look at him as he stands there.'

Certainly Mr. Ferdinand Walcot did not at that particular moment appear to the best advantage. His eyes refused to meet those of his accusers, and his teeth fastened on his under lip till the blood came; still it was with the old masterful air and tone that he turned to the lawyer at his side, 'When you have had enough of these falsehoods, Mr. Hayling—the obvious offspring of petty malice and baffled hopes—I beg you to proceed with the matter in hand, as I have no time to spare.' And he made a show of looking at his watch.

As Gresham nodded acquiescence in reply to the lawyer's inquiring look, the latter proceeded with the reading of the will. Its provisions were, in the main, what had been looked for.



Ferdinand Walcot was the heir, not only to the personalty—the money in the funds and elsewhere, all of which was left to him—but to most of the landed estate. To Lady Arden was left (she had, of course, her jointure, which was considerable) the tenancy of the Hall for life—and that was all. What was still more singular was that, although £3,000 apiece were bequeathed to Millicent, Frank, and the Great Baba, Evelyn (who had once been the prime favourite of her stepfather) had only a thousand pounds. To George Gresham, the Baronet's next of kin and only relative, was left but £5,000; and even that under peculiar and humiliating restrictions. He was to have nothing, and his bequest was to revert to the residuary legatee (Mr. Walcot), unless, for the next two years after Sir Robert's death, the young man should be up and dressed by seven o'clock in the winter and six in summer, save in case of illness; in which event he was to make up for the lost time after the two years were over. Moreover, there were some stern words addressed to him about the sin of deception, which fell upon Gresham's ear with the greater bitterness, since he perceived Mr. Walcot's evident enjoyment of them.

What seemed to those present even more offensive than the details of this document was the fact that Ferdinand Walcot was made its administrator, the sole trustee—a circumstance which even cautious Mr. Hayling afterwards described as 'very unusual.' But about the genuineness and legality of the will itself there was no shadow of doubt.

The whole family were more or less outlawed, and Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was appointed inheritor of their rights. When this document, which was a very lengthy one, and included a number of small bequests to domestics had been read aloud, down to the very names of the witnesses—two servants then in the house—there ensued a painful silence, which Lady Arden was the first to break.

'Do I understand, Mr. Hayling,' said she, in a firm clear voice, 'that this house and all that it contains are for my lifetime my own—that I am mistress here, in short, as of old?'

'Certainly, my dear madam,' answered the lawyer, confidently; 'as much so as you ever were, and more so.'

'Then I wish that man'—she pointed with a trembling finger to the new lord of so many thousands—'to leave this roof.' The poor lady also made some other observations not so dignified in style—for under pressure of a vital wrong it is not every woman who preserves repose of manner—to all which Mr. Walcot only replied by a pitying smile.

At last Gresham rose from his chair, and in a voice of suppressed passion exclaimed, 'Go sir.'

Mr. Walcot shrugged his shoulders with more than French significance: this gesture seemed to say 'Well, perhaps you are right; my absence is doubtless the only thing that will stop this good woman's tongue.'

He drew on his gloves, took up his hat, and, with a grave bow to the lawyer, left the room.

## CHAPTER XLII.

## A LAST APPEAL.

I AM afraid that if Lady Arden had been consulted on the matter, no equipage from the Halcombe stables would have been placed at the disposal of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, when that gentleman took his departure from the Hall; but as it happened, he ran no risk of a refusal of that courtesy, but, calling at the little inn in person, ordered a cart for the conveyance of his luggage, and took his own way to Mirton on foot.

Despite the indisputable success that had at last crowned his efforts, there was no sign of triumph in his mien; he walked up the street with head erect indeed, but no higher than he usually carried it, and when he turned into the solitary 'Wilderness' it dropped forward, and he clasped his hands behind him—which was his manner when in deep thought. The recollection of the last occasion on which he had trodden that same path—at full speed and pursued by two amateur detectives—might well have then occurred to him, but he was thinking of no such thing; it was not his habit to dwell upon the past at any time, and just now the future demanded his attention. Most persons would no doubt have concluded that Mr Ferdinand Walcot, with from forty to fifty thousand pounds in his pocket, or at immediate command, and with a much larger sum in land that could be realized, if necessary, in a few weeks or months, had now—since the blessings of his fellow creatures were not in his programme—obtained all he wanted; but this was by no means the case.

Man never is but always to be blessed.

He was thinking how a certain desired object could be most easily obtained, when at that very turn of the road, where he had once found the means of escape from a very unpleasant position, and ridden away on it, this very object presented itself—in the person of Evelyn Nicoll.

A pious person would have exclaimed, 'this is providential,' but what Mr. Walcot observed to himself was, 'This is luck, indeed.'

She was coming very slowly homeward, and so wrapped in thought that she did not at first observe him; he had time to notice how pale she looked in her mourning garb, and with what an inelastic step she walked. When she caught sight of him she gave an obvious start—which was, indeed, a species of shudder—then drew herself up, and quickened her speed; not to meet him we may be sure—but to get the meeting over. She would have passed him with a stiff bow, and without a word, if he had not addressed her.

'Miss Evelyn,' he said, in his gentlest tone, 'I wish to speak to you.'

She stopped and scanned him from head to foot, in a most unpromising fashion. 'Well, sir.'

'I have just come from a very sad scene,' he said, 'and which has been made still more distressing to me on your account.'

'Indeed?'

But that one word, and yet she somehow contrived to express in it incredulity and contempt sufficient to fill a volume.

'I see,' he continued, gently, 'that like the rest, you are prepared to misjudge me; that you behold in me a selfish adventurer who has enriched himself by discreditable means at the expense of others.'

She bowed, haughtily enough, but in unmistakable assent.

'Well, that is not so. I could not help the estrangement that took place between your late stepfather and his belongings; it was a misfortune sure to happen, on account of certain circumstances—very peculiar ones (which I will fully explain to you another time), and quite out of my power to prevent. What I wish to say just now is that it is my pride and happiness to think that if you have suffered loss it is far from being irreparable. It is true your stepfather has left you a mere nothing—a miserable thousand pounds—but it remains with you—you have only to say one little word—to become his sole heiress.'

'I do not understand you,' returned Evelyn, coldly; 'if my stepfather has left me a thousand pounds, it is only another proof—though I did not need it—of the love he bore me. As to being his heiress, that would be out of the question in any case. Do you suppose that I would rob George Gresham of his rights, even if it lay in my power?'

'George Gresham,' repeated the other, contemptuously, 'has forfeited by his own misconduct what rights he may have ever possessed. He is a man who does not know what is worth having; his behaviour to yourself is a supreme example of it.'

'The question of what is worth having, Mr. Walcot, is a matter of taste,' replied Evelyn, in deep offence; 'some people think that they obtain it, when they have got riches, though in obtaining them they have earned the contempt of every honest man.'

'You are more than severe, Evelyn, you are unjust,' answered Walcot, gently, 'but you can never make me angry with you. It is strange, and shows the intensity of your prejudice, that though you recognise Sir Robert's right to withhold his benefits from one person (yourself, for instance) you deny it as respects another. Who was so dear to him as I was; who (with one exception) was more near to him, by the ties of marriage, if not of blood? The fact, then, that he has chosen to leave me his whole fortune, instead of a large portion of it, is not so very surprising, and should certainly not evoke the contempt of all honest men upon its recipient. You may say that I schemed for it. If to make one's self useful to another in a thousand ways, to invite and reciprocate his confidence, to sacrifice one's time and pleasure for him, is to scheme—then I have "schemed." But the word is not applicable to my conduct in any other sense. That I had this golden end in view, while doing my duty to my friend and brother-in-law, may have been the case, just as any other honest worker may look for his reward; nay, to be frank with you, it was so. And yet my object, Evelyn, was not a selfish one. When we last spoke together alone I ventured to predict a time when I should address you under very different circumstances—no longer as a dependant, a suppliant at the feet of Fortune; and the time has come with unlooked-for speed. I am now a man of wealth,

which, however, is only valuable to me in that I can offer it to *you* : I do not say to share it ; it shall be yours unreservedly upon the day that you become my wife. Do not frown, nor flash your scorn upon me, Evelyn ; I tell you that I love you ; such love as mine is given but to few, yet, once given, given for ever—a love not lightly won, nor lightly to be rejected.'

'You seem to think so highly of it, Mr. Walcot,' replied Evelyn scornfully, 'that the love of others is as nought beside it. Mine, for instance, as I gather, you deem is purchaseable. It was denied to you when you were poor ; but you imagine that it has now come within reach of your purse.'

'You wrong me, Evelyn, every way,' he answered eagerly. 'Your love is beyond price ; and yet self-sacrifice—for a man's self is dear to him—and the devotion of a life might win it. The offer of my fortune was not made to tempt you ; I only wished to say "all that is mine is yours. I have not toiled for it, but for you only." Do not, however, suppose, dear girl, that I have only material reasons to advance in favour of my suit. I say nothing of myself, though, indeed, with this wealth to back me, I think I have the means within me of acquiring a great position only to be prized, however, because you, the sharer of it, will so become it ; but if the wishes of the beloved dead have weight with you, I may say that it was Sir Robert's latest wish, expressed to me upon his death-bed, that——'

He hesitated, and Evelyn, looking fixedly upon his face, inquired, 'well, what ?'

'He said that though he had left his wealth away from some who might have looked for it, he would be well pleased, indeed, if it should return to one of them through me ; he said, "ever since that other wish of mine"—referring, I suppose, to the engagement between Gresham and yourself—"has failed, I have desired that Evelyn Nicoll should be your wife." Do you hear me, Evelyn ?' for the girl, though still regarding him intently, said never a word.

'Yes, I hear you,' she now answered slowly. 'It would make no difference to the matter in question even if Sir Robert did thus speak, for he could not have been himself—the gentle, kind, just stepfather I knew ; in any case, indeed, it would make no difference, because my heart could never be given to

such as you, at any one's request, however dear ; but to be frank with you, Ferdinand Walcot, *I do not believe you.*'

'What ? Not my word ?'

'No, nor your oath ; I utterly distrust you, and abhor you.'

'You *do* ? And you dare tell me so—Evelyn Nicoll—to my face ?' His brow grew very dark, and from his eyes there shot a gleam of fury terrible in its concentrated malevolence.

'Yes, sir, do not let me have to repeat it in the presence of another.'

She pointed quietly down the road up which Mr. Dyneley could be seen approaching at quick strides.

Walcot cast a look at him in which rage and calculation were strangely mixed. It seemed to say, 'is there time before this man comes up, to drag this woman down to yonder cliff top, and there end her life and mine together, or is there not time ?'

If such was his inquiry, the reply, it seemed, was in the negative ; he took off his hat to Evelyn, and with a very creditable imitation of a smile of farewell, turned on his heel and pursued his way.



## CHAPTER XLIII.

## MR. STURT'S PRESENTIMENT.

WITHIN an hour or two of the reading of Sir Robert's will at the Hall, Mr. Sturt, in the inn parlour at Mirton, was giving his consideration to its provisions, which had been supplied to him from notes taken by Mayne and Gresham. He was a short 'squat' man, with what would have been unjustly called a moonface, because that of the moon has mountains, and Mr. Sturt's was perfectly flat, save for a little knob of a nose. But for his eyes, which were very bright and keen, so motionless was his stout form, and so squat his attitude, that he might have sat for a Burmese god.

Upon the whole, the items of the will were much as had been expected, and, while they showed clearly enough under whose dictation the document had been prepared, afforded no grounds for legal dispute. Gresham might say and think (indeed he did so) that his uncle must have been mad to bestow his estate on such a scoundrel as Ferdinand Walcot, and might impute, with reason, 'undue influence' to that worthy; but such vague charges were, of course, incapable of proof. But while the will held good there were certain points in it which not a little awakened Mr. Sturt's curiosity, and with a lawyer curiosity means suspicion. He was sufficiently acquainted with the circumstances of the family to understand why the legacy of George Grasham had been coupled with that singular restriction as to early rising. It was most likely a whim of the testator, flattered into action by Walcot in order to inflict a personal insult upon his enemy: even the appointment of Walcot, as trustee of that remnant of the estate which was not left to him absolutely, could—'unusual' as it was—be explained on similar grounds. He had probably persuaded Sir Robert to extend to him, after death, that confidence which he had always evinced in him during life, not so much to clear his own char-

acter in the eyes of others as to humiliate those who had shown such disinclination to his sway. But the proportions of the various bequests were not so easily explained. Why should Evelyn have but one thousand pounds while the other children had thrice as much? This disproportion of course, like all the rest, was owing to Walcot's influence; but why had it been exerted to the eldest sister's disadvantage?

'Sir Robert had liked her best of all the children,' was Gresham's answer to this inquiry, 'and that was doubtless reason enough for setting Walcot against her.'

Mayne demurred to this; perhaps because he could not imagine how any one could have been preferred to Millicent, and the lawyer himself did not think the explanation sufficient.

'No doubt,' said Gresham, perceiving that the motive was deemed of importance, 'my uncle was annoyed with Evelyn with respect to a certain matter, in which, however, if any one was to blame, it was not she, but I; and, taking advantage of that prejudice, this brute——'

'Meaning Mr. Walcot?' inquired the lawyer, with raised eyebrows. He had had to do with some base people in his professional career, but never used strong language concerning them. When a man was once in Newgate he expressed his real opinion of him; otherwise he was only 'the defendant,' or 'our opponent.'

'Of course I mean Walcot,' said Gresham testily, 'If I said "brute," I apologise—to the brutes.'

The lawyer smiled and smoothed his chin.

'If speaking one's mind would do any good, young sir,' he said, 'I would venture to express my own opinion of this gentleman; it is no use barking unless we can bite. It is necessary to get up very early in the morning to tackle Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.'

'That is just what Gresham is going to do,' observed Mayne laughing. 'Do you really think, however, Mr. Sturt, that even that—I mean any course that we can now take will remedy matters?'

'Not as they stand—no; but I cannot escape from the idea that, though everything our opponent has done seems in accordance with his legal rights, there is still a screw loose. It is a

mere presumption—scarcely more, indeed, than a presentiment—yet——’ Here he broke off. ‘Now these legacies have been left in rather an unusual way. Why should they be paid out of the proceeds of the sale of the estate when there is all this money at the bankers’ and elsewhere? One does not wish to be uncharitable; but, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, this seems to me to suggest two things on the part of Mr. Walcot: Haste—no time to be lost, you understand!—and a desire to realise at the earliest possible moment.’

‘To fill his pockets and be off before there’s a row?’ inquired Mayne.

‘Well, really, you young men put things in such a strong light; but something of that nature—merely an assumption, as I say—has certainly presented itself to me. Now there may be nothing in it—indeed, I understand Mr. Walcot came this morning on foot from Halcombe, which militates *against* this view——’

‘He couldn’t help it,’ interrupted Gresham; ‘no carriage was offered to him, and he was too proud to ask for one.’

‘Well, so far that is accounted for, then,’ continued Mr. Sturt. ‘And when he did get here, he was so anxious to catch the up-express, that he took a postchaise-and-four. Nobody takes a chaise-and-four now-a-days unless one is in a very great hurry.’

‘I wish I had known that,’ observed Gresham moodily; ‘I’d have put a spoke in one of his wheels, or bribed the postboys. Now he’s got clear away; whatever turns up, we shall never catch sight of him, you may depend upon it.’

‘If anything is really amiss,’ returned the lawyer slowly—‘though, indeed, I can’t say how anything *can* be—the will is not proved yet; and however anxious he may be to realise, even the personalty, it can’t be done in a day, you know.’

‘As to catching sight of our friend,’ remarked Mayne coolly, as he shook the ash from his cigar; ‘I think I can promise that we shall never *lose* sight of him. Bevill—though he doesn’t look at all like Bevill—has gone up with him in the express.’

‘Indeed!’ exclaimed the lawyer in admiration.

‘Oh yes, that’s my affair; quite independent of the Halcombe interest. I’ve an old score to settle with the gentleman—a

return match—Gresham here knows all about it—has to come off between us.’

‘It has been a long time coming off,’ observed Gresham gloomily.

‘No doubt: and the date remains unfixed; but, like Mr. Sturt, I have my presentiment. Our gentleman, as Bevill calls him, has got the start of me, no doubt, and the best of me hitherto; but he has not won the rubber. A treble and four, you know, does not always win.’

‘I like that notion of Bevill’s sticking to him,’ observed the lawyer thoughtfully. ‘It is well to be acquainted with Mr. Ferdinand Walcot’s movements, in case he might any day be wanted.’

“‘Wanted’ is a term used by the police with reference to malefactors,” remarked Gresham approvingly.

‘I mean to imply nothing of the sort,’ replied the lawyer with indignation.

‘I am sure you did not,’ observed Mayne conciliatingly. ‘It was what Paley calls “an undesigned coincidence.”’

## CHAPTER XLIV.

## COUPLES.

TO ordinary eyes, as we have said, there was nothing more in the parting of Mr. Walcot from Evelyn in 'The Wilderness' than a polite, if somewhat stiff, farewell; yet the Rev. John Dyneley, though he had not been a close spectator thereof, seemed to have seen something strange in the manner of it, for his first words upon reaching the young lady were, 'Has that man been saying anything to annoy you, Miss Evelyn?'

His tone was vehement, nay, fiery, and, if he looked like a son of the Church at all at that particular moment, it was of the Church militant.

'No, no,' returned Evelyn, quickly; 'or I should rather say he had no intention of annoying me. Pray do nothing rash.'

For the Curate, though she stood looking so sweet and pale beside him, kept his gaze fixed on Mr. Walcot's retreating figure in a very menacing fashion.

'Intention!' he repeated. 'A man like that is well aware of what he says, and should be made to account for it.'

Evelyn laid her hand upon his stalwart arm entreatingly—nay, tenderly, for a woman does not like a man the worse—even though he be a clergyman—for shewing fight in her cause.

'I beg of you to restrain yourself, Mr. Dyneley. He is gone away, let us hope forever, and has left few friends behind him. It was a dark day when he first came to Halcombe.'

'Yes indeed, and he has left evil behind him. His influence over Sir Robert has borne sad fruit. Everything, it seems, has been left to yonder scheming fellow.'

'It would be well if that were all,' said Evelyn, sighing. 'To do my mother justice, what she will regret far more than any neglect of her in a material way, is the thought of my poor stepfather's changed relations towards her of late months.'

'No doubt, no doubt; her jointure fortunately could not be touched, else that fellow would have doubtless laid hands on everything. And yet to think how Sir Robert used to love you all!'

'Nay,' said Evelyn, 'since we are talking of such a subject, it must be remembered that dear kind Papa was no real kin of ours, and that when his affections for us were superseded—by whatever means—we have no ground for complaint that he turned his bounty into other channels. It is very hard on George, no doubt; but why should he have made heirs and heiresses of us? As a matter of fact—though it is shocking to talk of such things when so good a man has but just been laid in his grave—Mr. Walcot has just told me that I have been left a thousand pounds.'

The Curate threw up his hands. 'Yes. A thousand pounds to his favourite! How his mind must have been poisoned!'

At the same time the Curate's conscience smote him, because with his chagrin upon Evelyn's account was, in fact, mingled an involuntary feeling of pleasure upon his own. Since this girl was, after all, no heiress, she would be in that regard at least within his reach. He had been hitherto kept at a distance from her by the thought, 'She is Sir Robert's favourite step-daughter; she will no doubt have a large slice of fortune; to one in my position at least she will be an heiress; and the Rev. John Dyneley was not of that large class of young divines who think heiresses are created for them. His pride forbade it, and also his humility of mind. He was not so great that he could despise the inequalities of wealth, nor was he so small that he was eager to remedy them when the chance offered itself in his own case. And yet now and then—in the forbidden moments of luxury which the imagination at times permits itself to all of us, except in the case of those ascetics whom the greatest of living writers compares with persons with colds in their heads, to whom life has no savour whether of good or bad—in some rare moments, I say, he had ventured to imagine that this girl was not wholly indifferent to him; his discovery that there was no bond of love between Gresham and herself, had given him, as we have seen, an exquisite satisfaction; and though he had absented himself of late from her presence as much as was

possible without exciting comment, it was only the more attractive to him, when, as now, it was by accident vouchsafed to him.

'You speak of a thousand pounds,' said Evelyn smiling, 'as if it were a thousand pence. I don't know whether my brother and sisters have been similarly remembered; but, if so, we ought not to be pitied. I have heard you say yourself that money is like an elastic band which can be made to go far, or not, at the will of its possessor.'

'Yes,' he put in quickly, 'if he has been accustomed to practice economy. I was speaking of such a person as myself—not of one like you. Our cases are very different. I have few wants, and some even of those I have of necessity'—here he gave a little sigh—'been compelled to forego; but *you*—'

'Nursed in the lap of luxury,' interrupted Evelyn, with mock gravity, 'enervated by indulgence, and the slave of fashion; I know what you are going to say.'

'Indeed I was not going to say that, Evelyn,' he answered hurriedly. 'I had no thought of blaming you; only when life has gone very smoothly with us, as it has with you, to find the road suddenly become rough or difficult; it will not, indeed, be very rough, thank Heaven, in your case, nor toilsome—'

'And why, Mr. Dyneley, should you thank Heaven for that on my account?' interrupted Evelyn, with a touch of pride. 'Have you so low an opinion of me as to imagine that even poverty, had I to face it, would appal me; that its chill atmosphere would destroy me like a butterfly who can only live in summer time?'

'No, no, Evelyn; you have never shrunk from duties from which other young ladies in your position might well have excused themselves'—he was referring to her constant visits among the parish poor; 'you need not look displeased. If I appear to wrong you in this matter, it is, Heaven knows, from no ill opinion of you; but you have always seemed to me one so far apart—above all vulgar needs, and—oh, Evelyn, if I had *my* will, the very breath of Heaven should never visit your cheek too roughly.'

'You are too tender-hearted, Mr. Dyneley, and too kind.'



'Yes; that is true,' he answered, sadly. 'I am too tender-hearted—that is to myself. Poor as I am, I have been extravagant enough to indulge myself in the luxury of a dream.'

He took her hand, and held it gently in his own. May I tell you my dream, the dream of my life, Evelyn?

It was easy to read in his face what he had dreamt, and that he was dreaming still. She slowly disengaged her fingers from his hold, and answered softly, 'Not to-day, Mr. Dyneley; not just now;' her eyes dropped upon her sable garb and stayed there; they shrank (though not with loathing, as they had done in Walcot's case) from the young man's impassioned gaze.

The Curate felt her reproof a just one; but that was not why he submitted to it with so good a grace; it was indeed no time to press a love suit, but without pressing he felt the rapturous conviction that it would be granted. His friend and patron was lying newly dead in his own churchyard, but it was impossible for him in that hour of blossoming hope to keep his heart in mourning. As Evelyn and he walked slowly home together, side by side, he felt like one walking by an angel, to whom it is forbidden him to speak of Heaven.

The young ladies at Halcombe had a sanctum of their own, next the schoolroom, where they were wont to pursue certain studies, and which was 'taboo' to all visitors; but, by virtue of his cousinship, George Gresham would occasionally venture thither, when he had reason to believe that they were not within, but that Elise might be. She read German with them there most mornings, and in the afternoons would sometimes sit down at Milly's writing-desk, which was always at her disposal, and continue one of those interminable epistles to her aunt at Heidelberg, which it is the habit of exiled German maidens in England to indite to their relatives in the Fatherland.

On his return from that interview with Lawyer Sturt at Mirton, Gresham had sought this apartment, with the excellent excuse of retailing what had happened to his fair cousins if he found them there, and if not—as occurred in this instance—to have a precious moment or two with Elise. He found her at the desk, as usual, but without pen in hand, and her pleasant face had such unaccustomed traces of woe upon it as prompted him immediately to remove them after Love's fashion.

'Oh, George, George,' she murmured, 'it is wrong to kiss me, wrong to love me ; I am very, very wretched.'

'Your statements are inconsistent with one another, Elise mine,' was his prompt reply. 'If you are wretched there is the more necessity that I should kiss and comfort you ; but what has happened ?'

'I have been your ruin.'

'That is news, indeed,' he said. 'My own impression has long been the reverse of that, and is to-day stronger than ever, for you have given me something to live for and work for.'

'To work,' she repeated. 'Yes, but why has it become necessary for you to work at all ? Oh, I have heard all about it from Millicent. You have been disinherited, and, alas, upon my account. I have been your ruin.'

'You said that before, darling, but the repetition of a statement does not make it a fact. I have been disinherited by the machinations of a scoundrel to whom nevertheless I feel thankful because he might have so contrived it, that what has fallen to my share should only have been left me on condition of my not marrying you, in which case we should have had to marry on nothing at all. You are not so contaminated, I hope, by your connection with this nation of shopkeepers and millionaires, as to call 5,000*l.* nothing.'

'No, George, no ; in my eyes, of course, it is a fortune.'

'Well, come, that is a comfort. I thought you were going to jilt me because I was not rich enough.'

'How can you talk so ; you know that it is not on my own account that I am so mi—mi—miserable. If I had only never met you on board that unlucky ship !'

'Oh thank you,' put in Gresham, with a bow of acknowledgment. 'If you had only met somebody else instead, I admit it might have been better for you.'

'Not better for me, George, no ; you were far too good for me—every way. But I selfishly allowed myself to be persuaded by you, and then Sir Robert came to know of our engagement—as I knew he would—and instead of your being made his heir, as would otherwise have been the case, he has left you next to nothing.'

'Next to nothing,' repeated Gresham, in mock amazement. 'She calls 5,000*l.* next to nothing. As to my own ability to gain a living, it is plain what she thinks of that. I am a fool and a beggar.'

'It is *I* that am the fool, and worse, to have beggared *you*,' answered Elise, bitterly. And once more she burst into tears.

'Now, my dear girl, don't cry, but listen to reason,' said Gresham, with tender gravity, 'and only see how a plain tale, as Mr. Raynes would say, shall put you down. The truth of the matter is, that in any case Ferdinand Walcot would have ousted me, as my uncle's heir, and put himself in my place. My love for you may have been his excuse; but I feel convinced that if it had not been afforded him, he would have found another. Do you suppose, for example, if Evelyn and I had agreed to marry—which we could not have done—that *that* would have saved me?'

'No, that would not have saved you, George.'

Her tone was so significant that it attracted Gresham's attention. 'Well, I am glad you see that,' said he, 'but why are you so sure?'

'Because Mr. Walcot loves her himself.'

'What, *he*—that villain? Do you mean to say that he wanted to marry Evelyn?'

'Oh, yes; and he really loved her, too, so far as he was capable of it. I saw that from the first.'

'What a clever girl you must be, Elise!'

'Not so,' she answered simply; 'it was because I loved *you*, George.'

'I understand,' replied he, thoughtfully; 'that made you detect the diagnosis of the same malady in another. Well, I am glad *I* didn't detect it, or I should have killed him. But are you quite sure?'

'Quite—more so to-day than ever; for I hear that Evelyn has been left only a thousand pounds; but the others three thousand. That was Mr. Walcot's doing, of course.'

'Yet that doesn't look as if he loved her.'

'Yes, it does. The poorer she was left, the more likely he thought she would be to accept his ill-gotten wealth, and him along with it.'

'My dear Elise, your sagacity alarms me. You should be placed at once at the head of the "Intelligence Department" of your beloved Fatherland. Why even Mr. Sturt never thought of this.'

'I don't suppose Mr. Sturt is in love.'

'Well, I should be inclined to think he isn't,' admitted Gresham; 'or if he is, that his passion is not reciprocated. Does any one else know about this?'

'I think Millicent does.'

'Then Milly is in love, too, I suppose?'

'There is no doubt of that—with your friend Mr. Mayne.'

'Then we're all in love together!' exclaimed Gresham, comically. 'I object, however, to Walcot's entertaining the same sentiments, or anything like them, as myself, and especially with regard to Evelyn. Do you think he has ventured to speak with her?'

'It is possible: he is not one to miss an opportunity.'

'If I had caught him at it,' observed Gresham confidently,

'I would have pounded him to a jelly.'

'So would somebody else,' observed Elise with significance.

'No? Do you really mean it? Then it must be Dyneley.'

'Of course it is. Mind, I don't think *he* has spoken to her. *He* is not one to take advantage of every opportunity of declaring himself, like Mr. Walcot, or Mr. George Gresham——'

'I object to being bracketed with that man in anything,' put in Gresham.

'Why so?' inquired Elise innocently. 'He is clever and accomplished; and Millicent tells me he is now possessed of at least 12,000*l.* a year.'

'What nonsense! Supposing even he had 120,000*l.* a year, that would make no difference to Evelyn. I know her so well, and respect her so much.'

'I know it,' interrupted Elise, with a little sigh. 'It is a misfortune for you that you could not go a little farther; would that you had fallen in love with her instead of with me! It is all my selfishness that has prevented it.'

'That is quite true,' said Gresham, gravely. 'It is yourself, and yourself only, who has won my love—though not from any other woman. As for regretting it, my darling, your wisdom

should teach you in any case not to cry over spilt milk ; but it is my firm conviction that the present condition of affairs, though it may seem untoward, will all work together for good—that is for my good, you know.'

She nodded; of course she understood that ; what others' good could she be thinking about ?

'I mean, Elise, instead of being an idle worthless fellow, I now mean to make my own way in the world. My notion is to read for the Bar, and become Lord Chancellor.'

'Good,' she said. She did not understand the legal title, but recognised the plan as admirable.

'I should never have done a stroke of work for myself,' he went on, 'if I had been my uncle's heir ; and you always said that idleness was so bad for me.'

'Is reading for the Bar and becoming Lord Chancellor very difficult George ?' inquired Elise, simply.

'Oh, dear, no. You want connexions, that is all ; if you were an attorney's daughter it would be the easiest thing in the world ; but as it is, I know Lady Arden has a cousin who is an attorney, and when I am ready for him, she will ask him down to the Hall.'

'And in the meantime ?' inquired Elise, gravely.

'Oh, in the meantime we shall marry.'

It was impossible to resist this genial and lighthearted young fellow, who parried the sharp stroke of Fate with a jest, and met all foreboding with a smile.

'It would be madness,' she murmured, while she suffered her last tear to be kissed away.

'It is a very common madness, darling,' said he, softly. 'Look yonder.'

He pointed to the window which commanded the whole valley, save those spots surrounded by the envious trees. Through the field that lay between the Hall and the Farm ran a pleasant brook, beside which two figures were now lingering. These were Mayne and Millicent. They were looking down into the clear water, a position which offered the same opportunity of seeing one another as that of being face to face, and had the advantage of not being so demonstrative.

'They are not thinking of drowning themselves—those two,' continued Gresham. 'And yet what *can* he be at?'

They were standing on the very brink, and Mayne was stooping down, with his hand in the water.

'It is where the forget-me-nots grow,' said Elise, sadly.

'Ah, I see,' replied the young fellow, 'he is what the Americans call "bunching" her.'

those two,  
Mayne was  
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## CHAPTER XLV.

## MR. RAYNES DOES BUSINESS.

IT is not to be supposed although the love-making by the young couples at the Hall trod so very closely upon the heels of 'he death of its late head, that they were unmindful of his memory, or were embittered against him. His very demise had in fact, in at least two cases out of the three, left them free for the first time to openly avow their sentiments. For Gresham had been hitherto restrained (not of his own will indeed, but through the influence of Elise), from the fear of giving Walcot an excuse for effecting his total ruin, and Dyneley, as we have seen, from the inequality of fortune which, while Sir Robert was alive, seemed to place Evelyn out of his reach; while even Milly had now become in a manner her own mistress, and thereby gave a certain encouragement to Mayne to press his suit. It was natural enough, nor is it surely to be regretted, that even death's proximity cannot still the pulses of youth and love, yet a certain remorse was felt more or less by all of them, and especially by the young women, that they could nourish such tender and gracious thoughts at a such a time.

The condition of Lady Arden, too, seemed a living reproof to them. Now that her indignation was no more excited by the presence of Walcot, her grief resumed its sway. She reproached herself with fancied shortcomings in her past relations with the dead man, and dwelt, with poignant sorrow, upon his many virtues of generosity and tenderness. It could justly be said of her, as is cynically written of widows in general, that she had never appreciated her husband's worth at its true value till she had lost him. She even charged herself—most unjustly—with the change of late in his conduct towards her and hers.

The grief at home for Sir Robert's loss, in short, was so general and genuine that it caused his neighbours some resent-



ment, and caused them, perhaps, to somewhat underrate his good qualities. They had no patience with the folly that had made him the tool of a man whom they had all disliked and feared, and they resented as landed proprietors the diversion of his estate from its legitimate channel into the pockets of an adventurer. Such was the term they did not now hesitate to apply to Mr. Ferdinand Walcot; for after all, except that he was Sir Robert's brother-in-law, who was there that knew anything about him? The circumstances of that first marriage of the late baronet were shrouded in mystery. There were Walcots and Debrett and Burke, but none of them were connections of the first Lady Arden. She herself was disposed of in the baronetage in a very few lines, and of course under the head of 'Arden.' '*Marr. June 5, 18— Madeline, daughter of Mr. John Walcot.*' A man who was not even an Esquire, and had apparently no fixed place of residence. A clever nobody is always looked upon with suspicion in a country neighbourhood, which, if he aggrandises himself, are naturally confirmed. Moreover, although Mr. Walcot was capable of attaching persons to his interest, and even of winning their regard, this was effected by superiority of intellect, and a certain personal influence which, while almost magical over individuals, failed with the general public altogether. The case is by no means uncommon, and has its parallel at St. Stephen's, where many men are popular whom the country at large refuses to accept, and *vice-versa*.

The general impression about Halcombe, I am obliged to say, was that the family at the Hall, and more especially George Gresham, had not only been wronged by Sir Robert's will, but that they had been swindled out of their rights; and that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was the swindler.

Still, it is necessary to do business occasionally with very disagreeable, and even dishonest, persons, and it came to pass that Lady Arden's friend and neighbour, Mr. Raynes, had a certain affair to transact with Mr. Walcot.

While Sir Robert was alive, he had felt a delicacy about asking him to sell the Four-Acre field, as it was called, contiguous to his own little property, but now that the field had fallen into new hands—not particularly clean ones, and which would cer-

tainly have no scruples about 'breaking up the estate,' if it should seem to his advantage—Mr. Raynes made his bid through his solicitor, Mr. Hayling.

To his surprise he received a note from Mr. Walcot himself, to the effect that he declined, for private reasons, having any dealings with Mr. Hayling, but if, as an old acquaintance, Mr. Raynes chose to call upon him, any time he chanced to be in town, he had no doubt that the matter could be arranged to his satisfaction.

If Mr. Raynes had been like other people, he might, perhaps, have hesitated to do business in this unusual fashion, but being a person *sui generis* (on which the other had probably calculated), and being besides a very Ahab in his desire for the field in question, he at once resolved to accede to this suggestion. He accordingly ran up to town, and called on Mr. Walcot at his hotel, the Cosmopolitan. He had timed his visit in the morning, in order to be sure to find him at home, yet not so early but that his surprise was somewhat excited at learning that Mr. Walcot had not yet breakfasted. He was, however, shown to his sitting-room, a very handsome one on the first floor, and had not long to wait his coming. Mr. Raynes was not a man of keen observation, but the alteration in his old acquaintance's appearance struck him as very marked. A few months only had elapsed since he had last seen him, but if they had been years he would not have looked for so great a change. Mr. Walcot's features, always sharp, had become still more so, his complexion, always pale, was now almost colourless; and his eyes, formerly, as Mr. Raynes said to himself, 'the best part of the fellow,' were no longer soft and lustrous, but haggard and cavernous, the very homes of care. 'I am sorry to be so late,' was his first greeting; 'in the country, you will be my witness, I used to keep better hours; but the fact is, I don't sleep very well in London.'

Mr. Raynes thought to himself, 'You look as if you never slept at all;' but he felt no pity for the man on that account; that insulting proviso in Sir Robert's will that now haled poor Gresham up every morning at so unwelcome an hour (which everybody knew had been dictated by Walcot) occurred to him at once, and 'it serves the beggar right' was his reflection.

What he *said*, however, was, 'Ah, you are not used to the carts and the omnibuses.' And then he grinned from ear to ear, as though he had been delivered of an epigram.

'It is certainly noisier here than at Halcombe,' returned Mr. Walcot. 'By the bye' [here the waiter brought in the morning paper, and the speaker paused till he went out again] 'how are all the good folks at Halcombe?'

'All well in health, except, perhaps, Lady Arden, and even in her case I fancy that mental trouble has more to do with her state of health than——'

'And the children?' interrupted Mr. Walcot.

'Oh, the boys are in high feather; indeed, I think Frank is brighter than he used to be; the discredit that attached to the poor lad about that giant he met on his way from our house, until all was so happily cleared up, I do believe affected his spirits, for he seems quite another boy; as for the Great Baba, he is the same affable tyrant as ever.'

'But the others—the girls?'

'Oh, I didn't know you included them in your inquiry after the children; they are both as charming as ever, and, as you have doubtless heard, their charms have been appreciated.'

'I have heard nothing,' said Mr. Walcot, in a husky voice, the tones of which he endeavoured in vain to render indifferent.

'Miss Millicent is going to make a great match with Mr. Mayne, George Gresham's friend; it is not going to come off just yet, I believe, though really, under the circumstances——'

And here Mr. Raynes began to stammer, remembering by whom the circumstances (namely, of Sir Robert's estrangement) had been brought about.

'And Evelyn?' inquired Mr. Walcot, taking up *The Times*.

This action—committed at the expense of courtesy—was intended to convey extreme indifference, and also perhaps, to hide the workings of his countenance; but his companion noticed and mentioned it afterwards—how the paper trembled in his hand.

'Well, they say she, too, is going to make a love match, though not so splendid a one as her sister. Rumour gives her to the Curate, Dyneley; one of the best of men. He was

always very friendly with the family ; but the affair has taken them all by surprise, I hear. The wedding, however, like her sister's, is not to come off just yet, whereas George Gresham's—you were aware, no doubt, of his *penchant* for the pretty little governess ?'

Walcot bowed his head. It was not so much a gesture of assent, however, as the mechanical action of one who affects attention when his mind is far away.

'Well, he is going to make short work of it. There is an inconvenience, you see, in his intended's staying on at the Hall, as half friend, half governess ; so the young couple are to be made one next month. The whole family are coming up to town, under pretense of getting her *trousseau* ; but in reality, as I understand, in hopes to divert Lady Arden's melancholy.'

Here Mr. Raynes' unaccustomed flow of speech was arrested by the expression of his companions face, which had suddenly become distorted as if from internal passion. His eyes, still fixed upon the paper, were starting almost out of his head, and his teeth were set together like those of one in a fit.

'Good Heavens ! is there anything the matter, Mr. Walcot ?'

'With *me*, no !' The sudden distortion had disappeared and was replaced by the old quiet smile of superiority. 'It is a weakness of mine, Mr. Raynes to show my feelings, when any act of wrong or cruelty is brought under my notice. I had the discourtesy to cast my eyes on such a case in to-day's paper while you were addressing me, pardon me ; with respect to this four-acre field, then, you were saying——'

'I have said nothing about it yet,' observed Mr. Raynes with an aggrieved air ; for he felt that he had been wasting his breath for the last ten minutes.

'This is the map of the estate,' said Mr. Walcot, pointing to where it hung on the walls ; 'there have been a great number of nibbles at it ; but I wished to sell the whole to one man. However, in your case, I shall be glad to serve an old friend.'

Mr. Raynes did not altogether relish this compliment ; but he bowed his acknowledgments nevertheless.

'I was thinking that ten pounds an acre would be a fair price for such land as that, Mr. Walcot ; you see it is rather an outlying bit, an doesn't spoil the symmetry of the Halcombe

property, as it were ;' and he indicated with his finger the situation of the spot in question.

As there was no reply, he turned his head, and there was Mr. Walcot poring once more over the newspaper, as though he had been alone in the room. He had certainly no intention of being discourteous, for the next moment he was profuse in his apologies.

'To be frank with you, Mr. Raynes, I am not myself this morning. It is unusual with me, as you know, to exhibit such weakness ; but I have seen here the death of an old friend. Once more, forgive me. You shall have the Four-Acre field at a reasonable price.'

'I named ten pounds an acre,' observed Mr. Raynes.

'Then so let it be. If you will only put the matter in legal form, but not through Mr. Hayling, if you please—I have my own reasons for declining to do business with that gentleman.—You may consider the matter settled.'

'I am really obliged to you, Mr. Walcot. I am sorry I should have brought ill news with me——'

'Who *said* you had brought ill-news ?' inquired the other with irritation.

'Nay, I only meant the coincidence of my calling on so unfortunate a morning. You said a friend had died.'

'True, true. Is it too early to offer you any refreshment ? Good morning, then ; *good morning*.'

'I have got the field,' soliloquised Mr. Raynes, when he found himself outside the door, 'and I have escaped from a madman ! What the deuce can be the matter with the man ? He's off his head for certain. I believe I could have bought the land for five pounds an acre. However, it is a good bargain as it stands, and I'll get it ratified at once. I musn't go to Hayling, it seems ; but there's that Mr. Sturt, Mayne's lawyer. I'll go to *him*.'

As his cab drove away from the door of the 'Cosmopolitan,' its commissionaire stood staring after it with his mouth at fullest stretch—a faint reflex of the grimace with which Mr. Raynes had favoured him instead of six-pence.

'Well, I'm blessed,' exclaimed that astonished official, 'if ever I seed a gentlemen grin so.'

## CHAPTER XLVI.

## MR STURT SUGGESTS A SEA VOYAGE.

MR. STURT was not Mayne's family lawyer, as Mr. Raynes had concluded, but was employed by him at the detective's suggestion for the especial purpose with which we are acquainted. To give instructions for drawing conveyances of landed property was not in his usual line of business; but, of course, he never turned away good money from his door. Moreover, Mr. Raynes' face was welcome to him as being connected, however indirectly (he had been introduced to him by his employer down at Mirton) with that great case of *Walcot versus Everybody*, which was attracting so great a share of his attention. For though all seemed lost Mr. Bevill still kept strict, though secret watch, over 'his gentleman's' movements, and reported them to the lawyer almost daily. It was unlikely, of course, that innocent Mr. Raynes should throw even the smallest scintilla of light upon the motives of so discreet and wily a man as Walcot, but then it was Mr. Sturt's experience that light came from very unexpected places; and he was always on the look out for it. He was an astute man, nor will I do him so great a wrong—professionally—as to hint that a too delicate sense of personal honour ever stood in his way; but he was really somewhat too blunt and honest—at all events in manner—for his particular line of business. This disadvantage arose partly, perhaps, from his having so much to do with mere agents—such as Mr. Bevill himself—with whom it was well to be curt and decisive, to prevent (among other things) their ideas as to certain lines of conduct over-riding his own. With individual members of the public, even when he felt they might be pumped to advantage, he had not a winning way like Mr. Walcot, nor even a patient and courteous one, like Mr. Hayling. Fortunately his new client, though naturally taciturn, was so



elated by his having got the promise of the Four-Acre field, that he was on this occasion inclined to be garrulous.

'You found Mr. Walcot friendly, it seems,' observed the lawyer, when the business matter had been arranged.

'Well—yes—he made no objection to my proposal, that is ; but he struck me as queer, sir—very queer.'

'Queer?' repeated the lawyer. 'Um—now, would you mind—I know you are a friend of the family at Halcombe, Mr. Raynes—would you mind just giving me your impressions?'

This was not the sort of proposal that would have been made to one like Mr. Raynes by a good judge of character. He was a man unequal to consecutive narration, which is as much an art in its way as speaking when on one's legs.

'Oh, I don't know about impressions ; I told him the news you know—what I thought would interest him—about the young ladies at the Hall—and he was glum—very glum. Since he'd got their money, I thought he would not have grudged their being settled in life, yet somehow he seemed to do so.'

'Seemed to grudge Miss Millicent making a great match, did he?'

'Well, yes ; and even her sister's marrying the curate. I fancied, indeed, he looked blacker at that news than at the other.'

Mr. Sturt nodded encouragingly.

'You are an observant man, Mr. Raynes,' he said.

'I don't know about observant,' answered that gentleman, modestly, 'nobody can help noticing a fellow when he has fits.'

'Did Mr. Walcot have a fit.'

'I think he must have had one—in his inside. I never saw a man make such faces.' And at the remembrance of them Mr. Raynes made a face himself which threw all fits—of merriment at least—completely into the shade.

'What did he make faces at? Miss Evelyn's marriage?'

'No, at something which caught his eye in the newspaper. It was quite sudden, and seemed to seize him like the spasms. He said he was subject to them, whenever he read any case of injustice and cruelty in the police reports.'

'In the Police Reports?'



'Well, I am not sure he said that ; but what he saw must have been in the Police Reports, I suppose, or else in the criminal trials. At all events he seemed terribly shocked.'

'It must have been a very bad case,' observed the lawyer drily.

'And yet it had its attractions, for when I was talking to him about the field he paid no sort of attention, but kept his eye on the same page. Then he apologised, and said he was not himself, inasmuch as he had just lost a dear friend.'

'Was that in the paper too ?'

'So I understood him to say ; though it seems funny, doesn't it ?' Two events in the same morning's *Times*, each of which brings on fits. If he reads the papers much it must try his constitution.'

'Was he giving his attention to the main body of the paper, or to the supplement ?'

'Oh, it was not the supplement.'

'Then his lost friend must have been a remarkable man, and had a paragraph all to himself. Ordinary folks, you know, all die in the supplement.'

'I never thought of that !' said Mr. Raynes, admiringly. 'You're a deep one, Mr. Sturt, *you are*.'

'I have to do with deepish people, at all events,' observed the lawyer deprecatingly. 'Mr. Walcot is one of them. That being the case, may I ask you, whether you do not think it possible that that whole pantomime,'—he paused, and held his finger up in an impressive manner—

'I'm all there,' interposed Mr. Raynes, with confidence ; there flashed a grin across his face from ear to ear, and the next moment it became an imperturbable monument of gravity : the change could only be compared to the instantaneous action of the slide of a magic lantern.

'I say are you quite certain, Mr. Raynes, that Mr. Walcot's emotion at the news in the paper—whatever it was—was not assumed, in order perhaps to hide his chagrin at something else ; the tidings you yourself conveyed to him, for example.'

'I am quite sure,' answered Mr. Raynes resolutely. 'He was all doubled up for the moment as though you had poked him in the ribs—like that.' And he made a playful movement

at the lawyer with his forefinger, which at once caused Mr. Sturt to contract his learned person in illustration. It was as though you had suddenly touched the extremities of an immense fat spider, who becomes a mere ball upon the instant.

Mr. Sturt was by nature dignified, but no peculiarities of his clients ever put him out of temper, though if they tried it too severely the circumstance was recorded indirectly in his little account.

'Well, as you say, Mr. Raynes [he had said nothing of the kind], there may be little enough in all this ; but, at all events, it's curious. All revelations of human nature are interesting, even if nothing comes of them.—I have your full instructions, I believe, as to the purchase of the field ?'

'The Four-Acre field that borders on the sunk fence of my lawn,' said Mr. Raynes, with particularity, as though the little map which, thanks to Mr. Hayling, he had taken the precaution to bring with him, were not sufficient, and he should find himself the proprietor of some central strip of Halcombe Moor instead.

'I should wish the thing to be done as soon as may be, for Mr. Walcot is rather a slippery customer.'

'Indeed ?' replied Mr. Sturt, lifting his eyebrows (the only physical exercise, except blowing his nose, he ever allowed himself). 'Well, at all events, you may rely on me to lose no time.'

If Mr. Raynes could have been present in the spirit for the next two hours after his departure from the lawyer's office in the flesh, he would have had cause to doubt this last assurance of Mr. Sturt, for instead of immediately applying himself to the acquisition of the Four-Acre field, that gentleman gave his attention for that period solely to *The Times* newspaper. With business men, indeed, this is not considered to be losing time—otherwise there is more time lost in places where time is said to be money than would serve to pay off the National Debt ; but the way in which Mr. Sturt went to work with his study of the paper was peculiar.

He first gave his attention to the Police Reports (which are somewhat neglected in the City, except by quite junior partners), and at once lighted upon a case of skinning cats alive, in

order, as the prisoner observed in extenuation of his conduct, 'to preserve the gloss upon the skin.'

'Ah! that's it,' exclaimed Mr. Sturt, not in sympathy with the offender, but because he had found what he sought. 'That's the paragraph, of course, by which "my gentleman," as Bevill calls him, would have explained his sudden emotion; now I wonder what it was that really moved him so! "Loss of an emigrant ship with five hundred souls on board;" what does *he* care about lost souls? "Proposed Tunnel in Mount Cenis"—he can't see his way through *that* to anything. "The interrupted communication to Australia caused by the breaking of the submarine cable last year will be, we are informed, resumed within a few days." Um! He was in Australia once; and was about to go there again. This may be worth nothing. "Failure of the Grand United Bank." *That* won't hurt him; he is much too sharp a fellow to have put his money there. I'm much mistaken if he doesn't carry it in his breast-pocket—or thereabouts; all the better for us when we do get hold of him. "Dean Asbestos at Westminster Abbey on the Future State of the Wicked." No; he doesn't look so far ahead as that. What the deuce *can* it be, that made a fellow of that kind shew his hand, even for a moment, to a man like Raynes? It must have been something *vital*. I see nothing here. "Let A. B. communicate at once to C. D.; the danger is imminent." No, no; he'd never trust to the second column of *The Times* for anything. These cyphers, too, can have nothing to do with him; he's not one for child's play——"

Here the door opened, and in came, unannounced, a red-haired, red-faced man, in the uniform of an hotel porter, but with a flower in his mouth, which in the lower classes betrays a tendency to mental abstraction.

'Great news, Mr. Sturt,' said he, laconically; 'No. 842 is going to hook it.'

'I *thought* as much,' cried the lawyer, excitedly, 'the devil is kicking him somewhere or another. Do you know where, Bevill?'

'No, indeed; I think I have found out enough in an hour and a half,' answered the other, pettishly; 'and near broke my

back beside with cording his boxes. He's off to the London Docks after a ship—so much is certain ; and it sails to-morrow.'

Mr. Sturt was already running his eyes down the 'shipping advertisements.'

'Are you sure you don't mean the St. Katherine's Docks,' he said.

'Perhaps ; I did not hear the orders given to the cabman, myself ; it was the commissionaire who told me.'

'Bevill, can you go on board ship to-night, for a longish voyage ?' inquired the lawyer, gravely.

'Of course I can.'

'You will afterwards, may be, have to remain in a foreign country, for an uncertain time ; will that suit you ?'

'To a T. I shall perfect myself in the language.'

'Very good ; in this case, however, you will know nothing of it to begin with.'

'Oh, Lud ; then it ain't the Continent,' muttered Mr. Bevill.

'Can you speak German ?'

Here the detective brightened up again : modern languages were his strong point in his own opinion, and indeed he spoke them, not with servile accuracy, but in a most original manner.

'When I talk German, Mr. Sturt,' he replied confidently, 'it would take a cleverish fellow to find out I was not a native.'

'Well, you must talk German and nothing else throughout the voyage ; and even then, though our friend does not speak it, it will be safer to take a fore-cabin ticket. He can't escape you on board ship ; when he lands, you must keep your eye upon him, and let us know his movements.'

Mr. Bevill winked the organ alluded to in the most significant manner. 'Enough said between friends,' it seemed to say ; 'I have kept this eye on my gentleman before.'

'Here is a cheque to bearer, get it changed and buy whatever you are likely to want, but first of all secure your passage on board the *Bothnia* from St. Katharine's Docks for Christiana.'

'Christiana ! Very good, sir. It's nothing to me, of course,' observed Mr. Bevill, indifferently, 'in what part of the world may Christiana happen to be ?'

'It is in Sweden.'

'Very good, sir. Let it be Sweden by all means. You will excuse me, sir, but I was once on board of a ship with him, in which he didn't sail after all—very nearly sent me on a wild goose chase of 15,000 miles or so—how do you know for certain my gentleman is *going* to Sweden?'

'Well, if you've any doubts,' said the lawyer, smiling, 'you had better ask at the booking-office whether a first-class berth was not taken by one answering his description between ten and twelve this morning. But as a matter of fact he *is* going. He has been frightened by something he read in the paper this morning—I wish I knew what—and is leaving England in hot haste. He chooses Sweden, my good Bevill, because we have no extradition treaty with that country; a man may live there in peace and quietness upon another Englishman's money, however he became possessed of it. And even if he has committed murder the law can't lay a finger on him.'

'Do you think it *is* murder, Mr. Sturt?' inquired Mr. Bevill, dropping his voice to a confidential tone.

'I don't know what to think, my man. It's the strangest case I ever had to do with; but that there's something wrong with Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, and *very* wrong, I am as certain as I am of my own existence.

## CHAPTER XLVII.

## ANNABEL'S CONFESSION.

MR. STURT had the fullest powers from Mr. Mayne to do anything that seemed likely to forward the coming off of that long-looked-for return match between the latter and Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, and, as we have seen, he had not hesitated to dispatch Mr. Bevill at a moment's notice to Christiana, for thither indeed, had Mr. Walcot betaken himself. Nor until that gentlemen had set sail did the lawyer think it necessary to inform his employer of what had been done. Then he wrote down to Halcombe, where Mr. Mayne was still residing, as though he were already one of the family, the details of what had happened. 'It is my fixed opinion,' he said, 'that matters have come to some sort of crisis with our opponent, which has caused him to leave England. We know he is not given to fieldsports of any kind, such as fishing; and that he cares nothing for the beauties of nature; what then could have taken him at an hour's notice to such a country as Sweden, except the necessity of putting himself out of the reach of the law? Any one but yourself would doubtless say, 'What is the use of sending a detective to look after a man who has thus secured impunity for his (supposed) transgression?' But I know this will not be your view. Bevill will stick to him like his shadow—a shadow thrown behind him and always unseen. He is certainly a first-rate hand. His name, from last night, when he went on board, will be Herr Landemann, a gentleman in the timber trade (a calling he professes to know something about), whose house at Hamburg has relations with London and Christiana. He wears gold spectacles, and has already a wooden look. . . . I send you, in case you may not have it at the Hall, a copy of the newspaper that contains, I am persuaded, the key of Walcot's departure. Perhaps the sharp wits of the young ladies may decipher this riddle, which has for the pre-

sent baffled me. It will be well also to cross-examine Mr. Raynes afresh; the chance of whose getting that Four-Acre field is, I am afraid, getting very problematical. It is curious, by-the-bye, and, to me inexplicable, why Walcot has not disposed of the Halcombe property; he would have had to do so, doubtless, at a loss, but where time (as it now seems) was of such vital consequence to him, why did he not realise? Reflect on all these matters, and give me your views.'

Mayne not only reflected, but called others into consultation. It was a blow to him that Walcot had withdrawn himself from England, and to a spot where no one could touch him, for he cherished quite as warmly as Mr. Sturt the idea that the man had committed some criminal act, and had been much more sanguine of inflicting retribution on him; but since he had undoubtedly fled his native land, a certain reticence which had been hitherto maintained about him at the Hall was no longer observed. Not only did Mayne put the case to the members of the family (which, of course, included Gresham and the curate) as Mr. Sturt had recommended, but the subject became openly talked about at the dinner table, as it had never been before. So Mr. Parker, the butler learnt that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot had sailed for some place with the geographical position of which he was no better acquainted than Mr. Bevill had been. 'What d'ye think?' said he to the cook at supper; 'that 'ere Walcot has gone clean away to Christianity.'

'Lor' who'd ha' thought it?' she replied. 'He give no signs of going there while he was with us, that's sure and sartin.'

'I mean Christianity, the *place*, ma'am,' observed the Butler, with dignity.

'Ah, that's another thing, Mr. Parker.'

On which the conversation dropped, perished prematurely, through deficiency of knowledge, as when the theory of Development is started at a kettledrum.

The seed, however, was carried up to the upper regions by a nursery maid, and found root in a wholly unlooked for quarter.

On the following morning, when Gresham, 'the early bird' as he was now facetiously called (for he never ran the risk of losing his narrowed fortune by being in bed after seven o'clock), now taking his usual walk before breakfast with his Elise, she put



the following question to him : ' You know Nannie Spence, of course, George ? '

He shook his head. ' I am very sorry, but even though it argues myself unknown, I don't know the young lady. '

' Nonsense, I mean Annabel Spence, the young ladies' maid. You must have surely seen her, if only at prayers. '

' I don't look at young ladies' maids at prayers, ' he replied stolidly, ' but it is true that I have seen Annabel. '

' Of course, and having seen her, you could not easily forget her. She is very pretty, though rather strange-looking. Her hair is light, but her eyes and complexion are like a gipsy's ; if she were not so young, one would think she wore a wig. Well, she is a strange girl, very reserved and reticent, but to my astonishment last night she asked to speak with me in private. We have been always very good friends, for like me, poor girl, she is an orphan, and we arrived here together, strangers to everybody, almost on the same day, but hitherto she has never given me her confidence. She did not say much on this occasion, though I could see she was deeply moved, but only begged that I would promise her an interview with Mr. Mayne. The request was strange enough, but her manner was so very extraordinary that, though she imposed secrecy I thought I would take your advice about it. '

' Quite right, but I would not mention it to others, if I were you, ' said Gresham, gravely.

' Of course not. You think with me that the poor girl may be out of her mind ? '

' It is possible ; but it is not likely that she will bite Mayne ; and he will judge, from the communication she makes, whether she is mad or not. '

Accordingly, after breakfast, George Gresham took his friend aside, and not without a humorous twinkle in his eyes, informed him that a certain young person had expressed an earnest wish to renew her acquaintance with him ; ' tender passages have passed between you, old fellow, but I sincerely hope, though she is actually in the house—'

' Who on earth is it ? ' inquired Mayne, turning a lively red.

' Its Annabel Spence, the ladies' maid. She wants to have another interview with you in private. '

' Never, ' cried Mayne, resolutely.

'But the poor thing is really in a distressed state of mind, wishes, perhaps, to apologise——'

'I accept it, at second hand,' interrupted Mayne, with alacrity. 'Only I won't see her alone. Nothing shall induce me.'

'Then I will be a witness to the interview.'

'You won't do, my dear fellow. You don't know what a girl that is. No layman will be a sufficient security. If Dyneley will stand by me, then—if she really insists upon it—I'll see her.'

So they went across to the Manor Farm, and spoke to the Curate.

'I'll be Mayne's witness, of course,' he said, 'though it is rather hard upon the girl.'

'Hard upon the girl!' exclaimed Mayne. 'You're as bad as Walcot. What has the girl to complain of? It is I who am the injured innocent.'

'That, of course, makes it much more embarrassing,' observed Gresham, parenthetically.

'Yes, at least two,' replied Mayne, earnestly, 'and one of them a clergyman.'

'Well of course, that makes it very embarrassing on account of one of them being a clergyman?' inquired Gresham, parenthetically.

'Nonsense. I mean on account of there being two persons,' exclaimed Dyneley. 'She has done very wrong, poor girl, but at the dictation of another; and we know how he has put the screw on other people, Gilbert Holm, for instance. Perhaps it was a mistake not to tell Lady Arden all about it at the time; but since that was not done, let bygones be bygones.'

'By all means,' said Mayne, precipitately. 'Tell her all is forgotten and forgiven, and that she needn't trouble herself to confess anything.'

'Nay,' said Dyneley; 'she may have some disclosure to make respecting Walcot.'

'Ah, that's another thing,' replied Mayne, thinking of his return match. 'If Gresham yonder will stop his sniggering'—this was in allusion to certain paroxysms of suppressed laughter to which that gentleman was giving way at very short intervals

—‘and you will stand by me—close by me.—I’ll hear what the young lady has to say.’

‘She had better come over to the Manor Farm,’ proposed Gresham, drily.

‘No, no,’ replied the curate, hastily. ‘She can see us in the smoking-room at the Hall.’

‘Well, upon my word!’ exclaimed the Incurable.

‘I quite agree with you,’ said Mayne, ‘that that would be very indecorous. Besides, this poor girl [here he imitated the Rev. John Dyneley’s pathetic tones] may object to smoke.’

‘What do you think of the summer-house?’ suggested Gresham, wickedly.

‘It was at last arranged that the interview should take place in the school-room, when the children should have gone out. Thither accordingly Gresham and the curate secretly repaired after luncheon, and found Annabel awaiting them. She rose from her chair as they entered, put the work on which she was engaged quietly aside, and made them a deep curtsy.

There was nothing impudent or defiant in her manner; but it was one obviously above her supposed station in life. A ladies’ maid might have been excused, under the circumstances, if she had shown signs of nervousness; and one would have expected a ‘sob’ rather than a curtsy. Her face was pale, but very determined-looking, and it was a pretty face—soft and intellectual too, as well as pretty—in spite of that anomaly in the colours of the hair and complexion to which Elise had alluded.

‘I am sorry to have troubled you, gentlemen,’ said she; ‘but the time has come for me to disclose certain matters. Her voice, which was soft and gentle, was in strange contrast to the expression of her features, which was that of some overmastering passion. ‘Is it certain, may I ask, that Mr. Walcot has left England, for good?’

‘He has left it for Sweden,’ observed Mayne, with keen significance.

‘I understand you,’ she said, ‘and I agree with you.’

Mayne was astonished, for her voice was not that which had spoken to him in the summer-house, nor yet which had falsely accused him in the presence of Sir Robert.

'I have behaved to you very ill, Mr. Mayne, but not one-tenth part so ill as the man of whom we speak—and who set me on to do it—has behaved to me. I have tried to do you a mischief who never harmed me, but I have not perjured myself to wrong one who trusted in him, as this man has done. You may punish me without mercy, only I beseech you to punish him, and without mercy also; to put him in prison, to scourge him, to kill him, if it be possible, though whatever you did to him it would fall short of his deserts.'

It was easy to see in the force and fury with which the woman spoke that this man had deserted her, and both her hearers—being men—were touched by the spectacle.

'His sin will find him out,' observed Mr. Dyneley, in his ecclesiastical manner (his natural one not being just then at his command). 'Revenge is not befitting us poor mortals, who need, ourselves, forgiveness. If this man has wronged you, Annabel—'

'If he has wronged me!' she broke in with impetuous passion. 'I tell you, that never since the world was made has man wronged woman as this man has wronged me. Your locks are pitiful, but I do not want your pity. I want your help to redress my wrongs, and there is only one way to do that—to avenge them.'

'I will do my best,' said Mayne; 'so help me Heaven.'

'You will?' exclaimed she sharply. 'You, whom I have done my best to injure? You, whom I strove to drive away from this roof in disgrace and shame? You, whose name I would have sullied, if I could, in the ears of her who loves you? I swear, up to this moment, though I knew all that, I have felt neither remorse nor regret; I have felt nothing—*nothing*—but my own fears and hopes—and of late my wrongs. *Why?* Because my whole nature has been marred and twisted by that villain to his own ends. I was the offspring of most unhappy parents; but born a gentlewoman. That matters little now; if I had good blood once, it has been poisoned. And, oh Heaven! I was so young—so very young.'

For the first time her voice trembled. She hid her face in her little hands, and rocked from side to side, as if in physical agony.

'I beg of you not to distress yourself by these references to the past,' said Mayne gently. 'We are quite prepared to take for granted any villainy committed by Ferdinand Walcot; to have been young, and unprotected, and confiding, was to have invited wrong from such a man.'

'I thank you, sir' she answered simply; 'it seems strange, even to myself, that I should still feel the pangs of shame; but I do feel them. I felt them when I stood before Sir Robert and that other man, and uttered those lies against you; but they are keener now. You are the last man who should wish to spare me one of them. Still, since you are so kind, I will forbear to dwell on that part of my life, though the recital of it would be a part of my just punishment. Let it suffice to say that when this man had ruined me, body and soul, he set me this task to do: to blaspheme the memory of a dead woman, by representing myself as her departed spirit. Behold her!'

'Gracious Heavens!' exclaimed the curate.

She had risen to her feet, and torn away the flaxen wig that concealed her natural hair, which was now disclosed, short, black, and curling, like a boy's, but exquisitely fine.

'If you have ever seen a picture of the late Lady Arden,' she continued, 'you will perceive a certain resemblance which ends, alas! with my mere looks. She was a pure, simple, kindly creature, and strove to be kind to me when I was an orphan child. I have repaid her by personating her gentle spirit, in order that a weak but noble nature should be induced to commit greivous wrongs on those who loved him, and who have been very kind to me. You stand with pity in your eyes—you two—instead of shrinking from me; that is because you do not believe my words, but think me mad. I tell you it is all true,—as true as hell!'

'Annabel Spence, we know it is true,' said the curate gently. 'We pity you because you were the tool of a stronger will, on which the true guilt rests.'

'No, sir; no,' she answered sorrowfully. 'It was not his will alone; I did it that he might do me tardy justice. I did it—I do not say for love of him—but for a bribe; if I suc-

ceeded in the crime proposed, I was to be his wife. I did succeed,—and he has deserted me.’

Mayne drew a long breath between his clenched teeth, and murmured ‘Villain!’ It was like the hissing of a serpent, and boded no less ill.

‘If it is not too painful for you, Annabel,’ said the Curate, ‘will you supply us with the details of your deception?’

‘They were innumerable, sir. I have been a fraud and a counterfeit from the first moment when—indirectly recommended by that man—I came under this roof. He taught me the dead woman’s songs, and I sang them outside Sir Robert’s chamber. I spoke the words Walcot put into my mouth in her living tones; at last, and without my disguise, I personated her very presence, and held converse with her unhappy husband as though I had risen from her very grave. It was through me that that unjust will was made, by which all who had shown me kindness here were recompensed by disinheritance, and the wickedest of villains was enriched.’

‘Poor Sir Robert!’ mused the curate sorrowfully.

‘Yes, indeed,’ she resumed; ‘he, too, is dead, and knows now that I deceived him. Miserable, crime-stricken wretch that I am! I yet dare not die, lest somewhere, somewhere—though, alas! there is no Heaven for me—I may meet them both.’

‘My good girl,’ observed Mr. Mayne, unconscious of the inapplicability of his epithet, ‘you distress yourself too much about this matter. The dead cannot be injured by the living; and, you may depend upon it, have forgiven you any harm you may have plotted against them. I am sure I can answer for Sir Robert at least, and as for the lady—she may not have thought much of your acting of her original part; we know what the professionals think of the amateurs; but not even the women, be sure, bear malice up yonder,’ and he pointed through the open window to the summer sky.

The naturalness of Mayne’s cheerful tones seemed to mingle with the atmosphere of morbid woe in which the unhappy girl had environed herself, as a breeze meets the mist and thins it.

‘You, sir, who are all kindness and forgiveness,’ she said, with a wan smile, ‘judge others by yourself, and the result is



harmony and happiness ; the same test applied to me begets despair.'

'Annabel Spence, who educated you?' inquired Mr. Dyneley suddenly.

'Ferdinand Walcot.'

'I guessed as much,' continued the curate drily. 'You have learnt his character ; and you must now make haste to unlearn his teaching. As it happens, what there is in you of good—and in spite of what you tell us, I am sure there is much good—works just now for ill with you. If you were like himself, impenitent and callous, his lessons would serve you better—for the nonce—than those you have now to learn. With all his wickedness, he is probably the less wretched of the two. But it will not always be so, Annabel, nor for long. Your eyes are opened at last. You have taken the first step that leads to peace and joy ; and you shall be led thither.'

'God help me ! who shall lead me ?' she cried in despairing tones.

The curate's huge hirsute face was mellowed with that light of charity and loving kindness which forms, doubtless, the raw material for saints' halos. He held out his great hand to her and answered, 'I will.'

'You're a deuced good fellow, Dyneley,' murmured Mayne. Perhaps, like many men of his class, he had thought a clergyman would have shrunk from undertaking a case of this sort—which, indeed, was likely to prove a very delicate and difficult one ; and that he would at most have prescribed for it. It is one thing to throw a plank to a drowning creature, but quite another to jump in and save her.

Then for the first time the girl burst into tears.

'Don't cry, *don't* cry,' pleaded Mayne ; the tears growing nearer to his own eyes than they had been since he left his mother's knee.

'Nay, let her grief have way,' whispered the curate, wisely ; 'it is better outside than in, poor soul !'

Presently she grew calmer, and asked humbly whether she need assume her disguise again.

'Yes, Annabel,' said the curate gently, 'it is necessary for the present ; you are no longer a counterfeit, remember, and we must not set all the tongues in the servants' hall wagging.'



'As you please, sir,' she answered gently. 'It is a very small penance for what I have done. I thought to punish myself by confessing to Mr. Mayne in person, and—oh, how kind you have both been to me!'

'Still, my poor girl, the way of transgressors must needs be hard, even when they repent,' observed the curate gravely. 'It will be necessary for you to repeat what you have said to us to Mr. Sturt, who will set it down in writing.'

'Why so?' protested Mayne; 'let bygones be bygones.'

'If you were alone concerned, I would say "by all means,"' replied the curate; 'but there are other interests to be consulted. What we have heard to-day are surely proofs of that "undue influence," if not of fraud, for which we have been looking so long. I am much mistaken if they will not upset the will.'

'But the damned scoundrel is in Sweden, out of our reach,' exclaimed Mayne.

'For shame, sir; for shame,' ejaculated the curate. 'It is shocking to exhibit such bitterness at such a time, and in the presence of this unhappy, but truly penitent, girl. Annabel, I charge you, in the name of Him I serve, and by virtue of my sacred office, to cast out from your mind all feelings of revenge and hate against this evildoer. He has wronged you, but you have wronged others; if you do not forgive him, how can you hope for God's forgiveness?'

'O, sir, you cannot guess—' murmured the poor girl.

'Yes, Annabel, I *can* guess; I know that he has heaped wrong on wrong upon you, beyond all human power of forgiveness; but nay, I trust, I believe, that your poor humanity will be aided in this matter by Divine grace. You must forgive Ferdinand Walcot.'

Annabel shook her head. 'If I say it with my lips, I shall feel it in my heart,' she cried. 'But I will try. Yes, for your sake, I will try.'

'Not for my sake, but for your own,' urged the good priest; 'and not for your own, so much as for His who has taught us all to forgive our enemies.'

The unhappy girl turned perplexedly from one to the other. On the face of the priest sat an inflexible determination; on that of the layman an encouraging smile.

'Mr. Dyneley is quite right, Annabel,' he said ; 'tell him you will do your best to forgive this fellow.'

'I will do my best, sir,' she answered humbly. 'I will say no more, please, gentlemen, just now.' With that she laid her face in her hands once more, and began rocking herself to and fro in a passion of tears.

'Poor soul, poor soul ! we will leave her for the present,' whispered the curate. And they left her to herself and her sorrow accordingly.

'It was a sad scene,' said Dyneley, 'was it not, old fellow ?' as they went softly down the stairs.

'Yes, indeed ; I had half a mind to give a word of comfort at parting ; and I would have done it but for you.'

'But for *me* ? What do you mean ?

'Well, I wanted to tell her that she might forgive Walcot with all her heart and a clear conscience ; for that *I* never intend to do it till I've brought him on his knees. She had only to shift the responsibility of seeing justice done on to my shoulders.'

'My dear Mayne, it is my duty to tell *you* as I told her,' said the curate, gravely, 'that vengeance is not becoming a Christian man. Heaven will take this man into its own hand.'

'Just so ; all in good time, no doubt ; but in the mean while I consider myself retained on the same side. You may think it a personal matter with me, but there you're mistaken. I am not thinking of myself, but of the wrongs of that poor girl up yonder. Forgive him ? No ; I'll see him *nearer* first, and then bring his nose to the grindstone, or my name is not Frederic Mayne.

## CHAPTER XLVIII.

## THE GHOST IN COVENT GARDEN.

THE importance of the confession of Annabel Spence had not been overrated by Mr. Dyneley. In Mr. Sturt's opinion, or rather in that of his counsel, it afforded ample grounds for disputing the late Sir Robert's will, if not for a criminal prosecution of Ferdinand Walcot. The latter measure was out of the question, as that astute gentleman had withdrawn himself from British jurisdiction; but the proceedings were at once initiated in the former matter. Walcot had really told the truth to Mr. Raynes when he said that the Halcombe Estate had not yet been disposed of. For some reason or other he had been in no hurry to realise the landed property that had fallen to him, and formal notice was given to the solicitors he had appointed in place of Mr. Hayling, not to part with the title deeds, the same having been obtained by fraud. These gentlemen, a most respectable firm, replied that the title deeds were not in their possession, and that for the present they were unable to communicate with their client, who had gone abroad without leaving his address.

'We know more about the gentleman than than they do,' observed Mr. Sturt, triumphantly, when he received their epistle; for he had at that moment a telegram in his desk from Mr. Bevill, with a certain address at Christiana. He was much more hopeful about getting back the estates for Gresham—to whom, as next-of-kin, they would revert, in case of the will being made void—than that young gentleman was himself.

'Why I have not yet received even my poor five thousand pounds to go to law with,' was his lugubrious remark, when they were talking on this subject during the lawyer's now frequent visits to the Hall.

'And a good thing too,' said Mr. Sturt, 'for when the limit of time allowed by law for withholding it is passed, we can bring

an action against the man for *that*, and all the rest will follow. However, we have already applied to the Probate Court, and warned the tenants not to pay their rents to Walcot, which they agreed to with much alacrity. "Slow and sure" is our motto, but we're getting on," concluded the lawyer, cheerfully.

'But who is to be answerable for the law expenses in the mean time?'

'Nobody; that is, anybody. Why, my good sir, you are the heir presumptive—nay, apparent—to twelve thousand a year.'

'I wish it was apparent,' sighed Gresham, ruefully. 'I wish I had even my £5,000 down.'

'I can let you have that,' answered the lawyer, confidently, 'and on very easy terms. But lor' bless you, you won't need a tenth of it—that is for preliminary expenses.'

'I don't want to touch it; I only want the interest of it.'

'Oh, well, there will be no sort of difficulty about that. In any case—since we have stopped the sale of the land—your legacy is safe enough, and you may make certain of your little income.'

'Thank Heaven!' ejaculated Gresham.

'For a small mercy, my dear sir,' put in the lawyer, smiling, 'considering the fortune which I hope will be yours at no very distant date. If this Walcot had got rid of the estates, and no embargo had been laid upon his doing so, why then, indeed, we should have had a stiffish battle to fight; but as it is—though we have only taken the first step, I already see daylight—you look now as if you saw it yourself.'

'Yes, I do—sunshine,' and in truth the young fellow's handsome face was aglow with pleasure.

'Dear me, how quickly you change about,' observed the lawyer, to whom Gresham had become much more interesting since he beheld in him the probable heir of Halcombe. 'I wouldn't do anything rash, you know, if I were you, notwithstanding things look brighter. I'd keep on getting up in the morning, for example, in accordance with the terms of your legacy.'

'I'll be prudence itself,' said Gresham. 'In the mean time, could you raise me a hundred pounds on my expectations?'

'Certainly. I'll write you a cheque this moment ; though I assure you, as to legal expenses, there is at present not the least necessity——'

'My good sir, I was not thinking of any legal expenses beyond a licence at Doctors' Commons,' said Gresham, laughing ; 'I am going to get married.'

'Oh, I see!' said Mr. Sturt, apologetically ; 'since you said you were 'Prudence itself,' I did not think of that contingency.'

Gresham thought Mr. Sturt the most charming of lawyers, a tribe he had hitherto suspected of raising objections and putting difficulties in the path of pleasure ; but he little knew that that gentleman had been instructed beforehand by his employer to portray his (Gresham's) future prospects in rose-colour, and especially to furnish him with any funds for which he might have occasion.

Mr. Mayne partly shared the attorney's sanguine views as to the eventual recovery of the estate, but, had he not so, would have taken the same course, to accelerate the happiness of his friend. His own marriage with Milly was not to take place so quickly as he desired—Lady Arden having insisted on a 'decent interval' between those nuptials and the family bereavement ; but he did not grudge Gresham his better fortune. Nevertheless, when the party from the Hall came up to town, ostensibly for 'a change of scene,' and also to procure Elise her *trousseau*, it is probable there was an intention of making a similar provision for Millicent. It so happened, too, that for the first time in his life, since as an undergraduate he had rowed in the University Race at Putney, the Rev. John Dyneley came up to town, no doubt on urgent private affairs, since what particular business called him thither was never demonstrated.

And the effect of this was, that at the private hotel 'off' Piccadilly, where they took up their quarters, there probably never was a family—in mourning—the younger members of which were in such brilliant condition and tearing spirits, or who had three such devoted cavaliers to attend upon them.

The 'Glamorgan' itself, as the Hotel was called, was in a dim and melancholy street of severe fashion (it had been patronized of old by Lady Arden in her days of *ton*), and its 'services of solid silver,' sepulchral waiters, and a sort of an-

cestral fustiness which pervaded it, would have depressed any less elastic guests. But this sombre and sublime *régime* was so utterly set at nought by the newcomers that Master Frank played at hide and seek with the chambermaids, and the Great Baba held dramatic performances—Punch and Judy entertainments, and the Marionettes—in the private sitting-room. These little people, too, unconsciously found their uses. When they were not ‘playing old gooseberry’ in the way of frolic and mischief, they acted as ‘gooseberry pickers,’ and did propriety in spite of themselves as companions to one or other of the three young couples; for Dyneley and Evelyn had somehow become as inseparable as Mayne and Millicent, or as Gresham and Elise—indeed, as nothing had been actually declared between them (and moreover Dyneley was a parson, which always gives a man ‘a pull’ in such cases), they had perhaps more opportunities of what Frank irreverently called ‘spooning’ than the others.

Gresham himself, though nearer to his bliss, had his little *têtes-à-têtes* sadly interfered with by quite another sort of companionship—namely, interviews with his solicitor; for the probability of his becoming the proprietor of the Halcombe estates was growing with every hour, and would perhaps have elated him, had he not had something still brighter to think about in his approaching marriage.

Elise, on the other hand, thought a good deal of his changed prospects, but by no means with exultation. Even to have won her lover in his comparative poverty had seemed to her too great good fortune; and now that he was about to inherit such undreamt of wealth she could hardly believe that she was fated to share it. It seemed to this modest though independent little Teuton that George could have done so much better with himself, and almost that he ought to do so even now. She had not even ventured to write to her aunt at Hamburg of the prospects that were opening out for her, not because they might not, after all, be realised, but from her deep sense of their incongruity; they did not dazzle her own eyes—indeed, they were not fixed on them at all—but she understood the effect that they would have upon that relative, and, indeed, upon most people. In the household in which she had once filled so



humble a part, and now played so important a one, she knew, however, no jealousies were entertained against her. If Lady Arden still nourished any disappointment respecting what might have been between her eldest daughter and Gresham, she did so in secret ; no change in her manner—save that it was kinder and more familiar—betrayed any sore feeling with respect to Elise's new position ; George had a perfect right to choose for himself, and though he might have looked higher, she acknowledged to herself that he had not chosen unworthily. There had been, indeed, a certain concealment in the matter, at which she might have justly taken umbrage, but the responsibility for that had lain with Gresham alone,—Elise, as we know, had both condemned and protested against it—and he had confessed as much in the same breath with which he acknowledged his engagement.

Of the two sisters, it was said, by some who boasted of their acquaintanceship without having obtained any familiar knowledge of them, that they would not have taken Miss Hurt's social elevation so coolly had they not had their own lovers to think about ; that being so well satisfied in fact with their own position they had no mind to quarrel with the good fortune of their governess. But both Evelyn and Millicent were in truth by nature incapable of the envious feelings which were thus imputed to them ; moreover, they loved Elise, for her own sake ; her kindness, her love of duty, her devotion to the children, and the simplicity and humility of her disposition, were qualities they knew how to appreciate. Nor was it the least of her credentials that she was honoured with the approbation and estimation of the Great Baba. He always termed her, 'My Elise,' and had burst into tears upon being informed that arrangements were pending under which she would be no longer his exclusive property, but another's. In the mean time, however, she devoted herself to him as much as possible, and when Gresham was closeted with Mr. Sturt, would often take him for a stroll among the shops, in the contents of which he took so absorbing an interest, that his little nose stood in some danger of becoming tabular—through being so constantly flattened against the windows.



On one of these excursions a very singular circumstance took place, which neither Elise nor her small companion are ever likely to forget to their dying day, albeit (like the windows), it only made a transient impression on the latter at the time, and hardly seemed worth speaking about. Elise, too, did not speak about it at the moment, and it being remarked that she came home looking very pale and haggard, was promptly sent to lie down for an hour or so by Lady Arden; an order she obeyed with a sense of immense relief and gratitude. 'She has half tired herself to death, lugging about that monstrous Baba,' was her ladyship's reflection, 'and George will never forgive us, if he finds it out.'

In the mean time the supposed cause of her ill looks was regaled with chocolate creams (which he loved not wisely but too well, for they made him fatter than ever) and a review of his soldiery. The circumstance of slaying a staff officer on horseback with a pea from his cannon, awakened a certain association in his Highness's mind.

'Do's oo know,' observed he to his aide-de-camp (Frank) 'that dear Papa was never put in the pit hole after all?'

'Hus—h, dear, hush,' whispered Frank, gently. 'Baba musn't talk about such sad things.'

'But he wasn't, I tell you,' persisted this terrible child. 'He must have got out of the feather coach when Diney (Dyneley) wasn't looking, and then they popped in somebody else.'

'What is the dear child saying?' inquired Lady Arden, looking up from her desk; 'it never does to contradict him, you know, Frank.'

'Let *me* take him,' said Evelyn rising quickly, and transferring the child to her own lap. 'Let us shoot the French, and not tell stories.'

'Baba never tells stories,' observed that potentate with irritation. 'I saw Papa in the street, and wanted to run to him. But Elise said "No," "Mein gott no," she said, and was very fitened.'

Fortunately Lady Arden had resumed her occupation, and did not hear this, but Franky's eyes were growing enormously large, and he murmured, softly, 'Was it his ghost, Evy?'

'Hush, hush, dear ; there must have been some resemblance to dear Papa in some other person, which deceived the child, of course. If Baba will come to Evy's room, she has got a macaroon for him.

In this prospect all ideas of the other world were at once lost to his Highness, and he toddled off in an ecstasy.

An hour later Gresham came in, and was informed that Elise did not feel equal to coming down to dinner—had thoroughly overdone herself, in fact. She had written a little note to him which Evelyn slipped into his hand.

'Come with Evy,' it said, 'When you can get away without exciting remark ; I want to speak to you.'

There was a little boudoir chiefly for the ladies' use, too small to be called a drawing-room, to which Evelyn presently conducted him, and where he found Elise, still very pale, and quite unlike herself.

'Good Heavens, what is the matter, darling ?'

'Don't ask her many questions,' said Evelyn. 'She will tell what she can : but the fact is, her system has received a shock. I will tell you what has happened—or what she thinks has happened—and then you may ask her about it.'

Elise nodded, and smiled feebly.

'She has not been run over !' ejaculated Gresham.

'No, no ; how like a man that is ! There is nothing physically the matter with her, George ; but her nerves are gone. Now listen. When you parted with her, at Mr. Sturt's, she took the child to Covent Garden to see the flowers. They were in the covered walk there looking at some bouquets, when Elise saw some grapes, and asked Baba whether he would like a bunch. He said "Yes," of course, and the woman was cutting one for him when he cried out, "Look, look, there's Papa !" Elise looked round and saw a figure, very like dear Papa's, only more bowed in the shoulders, going slowly down the arcade. She was herself struck by the resemblance, but replied, "No, no, dear, your poor Papa is dead and buried you know ; that is only some one like him." But Baba pulled at her gown, and taking no notice of the grapes,—which was certainly remarkable—'

'A miracle,' put in Gresham smiling ; 'I am prepared to believe anything after that.'

'Don't jest, George,' said Evelyn, gravely; 'for in poor Elise's eyes the thing is most serious.'

'It is as true as I sit here,' murmured Elise.

'What is true?' exclaimed Gresham. 'I understand that Baba saw the back of somebody that reminded him of my uncle.'

'Yes; but they followed this man,' continued Evelyn, 'and just as he reached the door of an hotel, he turned round, face to face with them—so Elise says—and then they both recognised him. Baba wanted to follow him into the hotel, but Elise was so shocked and frightened that she called a cab, and came home, where she arrived more dead than alive herself.'

'The poor dear must have overworked herself, and been in want of food,' suggested Gresham.

Elise herself sat with her eyes closed—in appearance, as Evelyn had said, 'half dead,' so that he unconsciously spoke of her like a doctor discussing his patient with her nurse.

'No; she had a very tolerable lunch, and declares she was not at all tired. She was not thinking of dear Papa until the child spoke of him, and felt in excellent health and spirits.'

Gresham perceived that the case was serious, but not unnaturally thought that ridicule was the best cure for such an hallucination.

'I really think that we have had enough rubbish in connection with my poor uncle and the other world already,' he said. 'It is so unlike Elise's good sense.'

'Of course it is,' said Evelyn, 'but that only makes the affair more remarkable: moreover there is Baba's testimony given, I am bound to say, with all the seriousness of a bench of judges.'

'My dear Evelyn, what a witness! a child of four years old!'

'I saw your uncle,' murmured Elise, looking slowly up, 'as plainly as I see you. He was whiter and older looking than at Halcombe, but it was the same face.'

'Then of course he recognized you, my darling,' said Gresham, smiling.

'I am not sure: I think so,' she answered, simply. 'He seemed to look mournfully upon me, and also deprecatingly. I have been thinking about that.'

'The fact is, George,' put in Evelyn—'though I am sure Elise has nothing to reproach herself with, since it is ourselves rather than Elise, if anyone, who is to blame—it struck her that he was lamenting how soon he had been forgotten. Lost in our own selfish pleasures, we have not been so mindful perhaps as we might have been of the loss of poor Papa.'

'I don't acknowledge that,' answered Gresham. 'That is a mere morbid view.'

'So Elise has persuaded herself; but what she has got into her mind, and which I cannot argue her out of,' said Evelyn with a faint blush, 'is that Papa is displeased with her for having won your affections; since he had other plans for you.'

'Exactly,' answered Gresham, coolly: 'that explains half the mystery. Elise had her mind already prepared for this visitation. —However, my darling,' he continued more gently, 'this affair shall be thoroughly inquired into. I promise you that this ghost shall be exorcised; fortunately, we have a clergyman on hand to do it. I will go down with Dyneley to Covent Garden this very evening. Do you happen to remember the name of the hotel?'

'Yes dear,' replied Elise, and this time in less depressed tones. It was evidently a relief to her that the matter was to be seriously investigated. 'I saw it written up on the coffee-room blinds. It was "The Old Hummums."'

'Very good. No doubt the matter will admit of explanation. In the mean time pray take a reasonable view of it.'

He stooped down and kissed her tenderly; as if to make amends for his assumed severity.

'You never heard of the Old Hummums before, I suppose, by the bye?' he asked.

'I? No, love. But it seems to me now that I shall never forget the name.'

As he left the room, Evelyn asked him why he had put that last question.

'Well, the fact is, I thought the poor dear had seen her apparition in a spot she knew was connected with my uncle by association. When in London he always used to put up at "The Old Hummums,"—which is certainly rather curious.'

## CHAPTER XLIX.

## AT THE OLD HUMMUMS.

IMMEDIATELY after the ladies had left the dinner-table Gresham told the strange story of Elise's adventure to Mayne and Dyneley. Neither of them were disposed to be jocular on such a subject, though perhaps for different reasons.

'I am afraid Miss Hurt has been taking too much out of herself of late,' observed the former. 'Our life in London is a great change from the quiet routine of Halcombe. As for the ghost—I confess I don't believe in ghosts within the Metropolitan district.'

'Still, for her own sake the matter should be investigated,' said Dyneley.

Mayne shrugged his shoulders. 'It seems to me to be a case of nerves. To treat such an hallucination seriously would be to give it a substantial form, which is the very thing to be avoided. Besides, you can't go to the Hummums, and inquire of the headwaiter whether a gentleman's ghost happened to be just now on the premises. Don't you think—with Miss Spence's experience so fresh in our minds—that we have had almost enough of ghosts.'

'That is the very observation I made myself,' observed Gresham, thoughtfully. 'Of course the whole affair is absurd, but I am bound to say that Elise is not one of the hysterical sort.—Will you come with me to the Hummums, Dyneley? We shall probably see some old gentleman who bears a strong resemblance to my poor uncle, when the matter will be explained at once. We need not be half an hour away, and Mayne can tell the ladies we have gone to smoke a cigar.'

'I will go with you of course,' said Dyneley. 'I think with you that the matter should at once be cleared up for Miss Hurt's sake. Evelyn would never think so seriously about it unless there was something in it.'

At this Mayne chuckled, and muttered something about female influence, which brought the colour into the cheeks of both of them ; and as they went down stairs, 'My best compliments to the ghost,' were his last words to them over the banisters.

It was certainly a somewhat ridiculous expedition. Their cab took them to Covent Garden somewhat quicker than Gresham wished, for he had not made up his mind how to proceed when they arrived at their destination.

'I suppose we had better ask to see the Visitors' List?' suggested his companion as they paused before the door of the hotel.

'All right, old fellow—only they won't show it us, even if they have one.'

Indeed the waiter informed them that 'parties' only left their names when they were going away. If the two gentlemen were in search of any particular 'party,' he could no doubt however give them the information desired.

Now the waiter was young, and as Gresham thought might be new to the place, and never have heard of his uncle ; else, since the baronet's death must surely be known to the hotel household, he could hardly have brought himself to make his next inquiry ; 'Is Sir Robert Arden staying in the house ?'

'Sir Robert Arden ? Yes, sir : came last night from Liverpool. Sitting-room No. 4, first floor.'

The two men interchanged looks of amazement.

'If you know the gentleman very well,' said the waiter, perceiving their embarrassment, 'I will take up your names, but otherwise—he has just dined, and——'

'Take this card up : I am his nephew,' said Gresham. 'We must see this out, Dyneley,' he added in a whisper. 'The man has taken a name that doesn't belong to him. I should not be astonished if we found Walcot at the bottom of this.'

'But the likeness ?' gasped the curate.

'True, I had forgotten that,' answered his companion as they followed the waiter up stairs. 'This is tremendous. I would give fifty pounds if we had Bevill here.'

The waiter knocked at the sitting-room door, went in with the card, and after a slight delay came out again. 'Walk in, gentlemen,' he said.

Gresham entered first, and Dyneley, following, was careful to close the door behind them.

A tall figure, with a cigarette in his mouth, rose from the sofa to receive them; an older and thinner figure than when they had seen it last, and with a face inexpressibly weary and dejected, but the face and figure of Sir Robert Arden, and of no other.

'So you have found me out already, George?' were his first words, and he held out a wasted hand.

'Is it possible that I see you alive, uncle?' exclaimed Gresham. 'Dyneley, are we dreaming?'

'Yes, I am alive,' returned the old man, wearily, 'though it would be better for me, and for you, if it were otherwise. I trust all are well at Halcombe?'

Gresham nodded assent: he could not find voice to speak, Astounding as it was to behold this man, apparently risen from the dead, it was still stranger to hear him talk in this indifferent strain; his tone indeed was melancholy and depressed to an extreme degree, and his face wandered from one to the other with pitiful and appealing looks, but the wonder was that his own position did not seem to appear to him as in any way abnormal or inexplicable.

'You gaze at me with wonder,' continued Sir Robert, 'as well you may, but you have no reproaches to heap upon me. And yet I have behaved ill to both of you. You are a clergyman, Dyneley; what must you think of one who has left those he loved without a word, and sown distress and pain broadcast among them, at the bidding of a scoundrel?'

'We know you have been deceived, sir,' said the curate gently.

'Deceived? Yes, I have been deceived,' answered the other with a sigh that bespoke as much bitterness as regret. 'It was cruel, it was vile in him. But, oh, that I could think it was *all* deceit! Can Lucifer, think you, Mr. Dyneley, have angels under him—blessed spirits that obey his wicked will?'

'No, sir,' answered the curate gravely. 'He may pretend to have such, being a liar and the father of lies, but it cannot be so.'



Sir Robert shook his head, and sighed even more deeply than before. 'You do not know what I know, you have not seen what I have seen,' he said.

'We *do* know, we *have* seen,' answered the curate, 'if, as I judge, you are referring to certain manifestations, professing to be spiritual, and in connection with one very dear to you who has passed away.'

'What do you mean?' inquired the baronet eagerly. 'Is it possible that my sainted Madeline—George, Dyneley, what have you got to tell me?'

'Nothing, sir, but what mere mortals can tell,' continued the curate solemnly. 'We pretend to no cognisance of matters that have been hidden from the eyes of man since God created him. We make no claim to pry into matters beyond the grave. But by great good fortune we have found out a villain who has made use of such pretensions. His name is—Ferdinand Walcot.'

'Oh, Heavens, her own brother! It is impossible!'

'We have seen the woman, Sir Robert, who, at his instigation, personated your dead wife.'

'The woman who personated *my Madeline*?'

'Yes, sir. The voice you heard was *her* voice, the face you saw was *her* face. It was Annabel Spence—the cast-off mistress of your brother-in-law. She shall confess it to you, if need be, with her own lips.'

Sir Robert put up his hand with a gesture of abhorrence.

'Blasphemous and accursed deceiver,' he muttered; 'how dared she do it?'

'It was not her doing, Sir Robert,' answered the curate firmly. 'She was merely the instrument of another; your poor wife was nothing to *her*, but in this Walcot—"her own brother," as you have just said—it was infamous, blasphemous, or what you will. You took a serpent to your bosom, and he stung you.'

Sir Robert held up his hand in a deprecating manner.

'Have you not even yet, sir, the courage to cast him from you?' continued Gresham. 'You have forgiven him already, it seems; it is well. But you still owe a duty to others—to those whom you yourself say you have wronged; I am not one of them, and therefore I may speak—'

'Merely, mercy,' cried Sir Robert, clasping his thin hands together; 'give me some time, man. You don't know what you ask. Can I pluck out my own heart strings?'

'Is it possible, then,' pursued the curate, 'that in spite of all that has happened, you still cling to this miscreant? There must surely be some misunderstanding in your own mind.'

'No, no; I perceive that he has deceived me. I have known it long ago; when he left me at Marseilles to cross the world alone.'

'Then you did not return to England with him,' put in Gresham, whom a certain awful question constantly recurring within him had hitherto made silent. 'If this is indeed my uncle,' it ran, 'who then was the man I saw lying dead at Salton Point, and whom we buried at Halcombe?'

'I? No. He left the ship and me that night, and I went to Australia all alone. We had had no quarrel, but there were some matters—they had reference to yourself, George—on which we had differed of late. I had already begun to repent too of having alienated myself from my family, and he had remonstrated strongly against what he called my weakness in that respect.'

'He felt in fact that his influence over you was losing its power?' suggested Dyneley.

'Yes: that was no doubt the cause of his deserting me so suddenly. I did not think so at the time, but during that long and lonely voyage I had plenty of time for thought, and my eyes were opened upon many things. Among others I perceived clearly how harshly, cruelly, and ungratefully I had been induced to behave to those who had been so dear to me at Halcombe. As to Lady Arden, the shame that consumed me upon her account was such that, though an opportunity twice offered itself in vessels we spoke with, I had not the courage to communicate with her by letter. Before the ship reached Australia, however, I had resolved to make a clean breast of it, and would have done so on the instant, but that the telegraph to England was out of order.'

Here Dyneley and Gresham interchanged a significant glance. It was the news then of the telegraphic communication having been re-established between the two countries that had so

alarmed Walcot during his interview with Mr. Raynes, and which had caused him instantly to fly to Sweden.

'What I suffered,' continued Sir Robert, 'on finding myself cut off, as it were, from my repentance by this circumstance, no tongue can tell. The strange country, the new scenes, were lost upon me; I was consumed with an insatiable desire to make my peace with all of you; and it monopolised me wholly. I took passage home by the first ship—ah, what a voyage it was! I mixed with none of the passengers; I was a recluse feeding on my own miserable thoughts and memories. I grudged every hour of our tardy course till we came in sight of England; and then—then fear and shame took possession of me. I came up here last night, yet dared not make my presence known to any of you. What might not have happened, during my long absence, to those I had deserted; what change might not have taken place in their own feelings towards me!'

'There has been no change, my dear uncle, so far as their affection for you is concerned,' interposed Gresham gently. 'There have been other changes, however, of which, it seems, you do not know anything.'

'But you told me all were well. Oh Heavens, what has happened?'

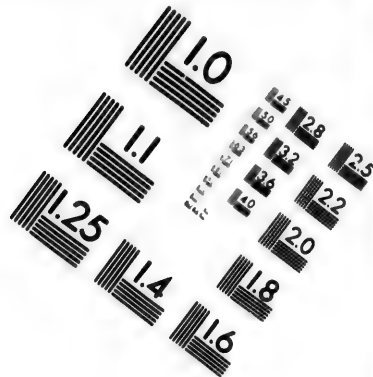
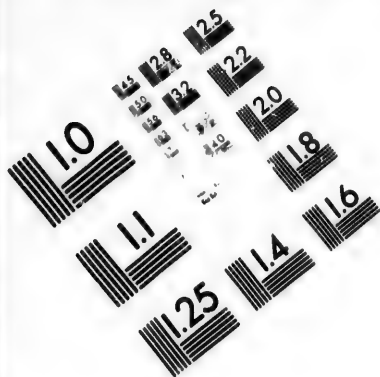
'Nothing has happened, sir, thank Heaven, to either Lady Arden or the children; they are even now in London.'

'So near!' exclaimed Sir Robert with a start of joy. 'And yet,' he added, with a sigh, 'they may be no longer near in the sense of dearness. It is impossible but that my conduct must have estranged them.'

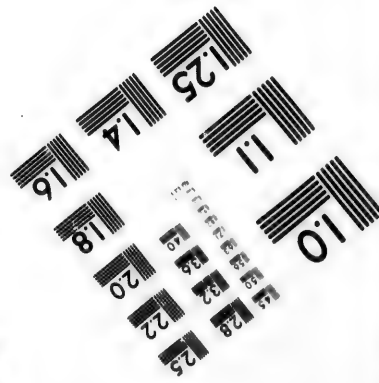
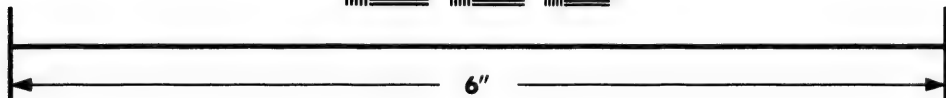
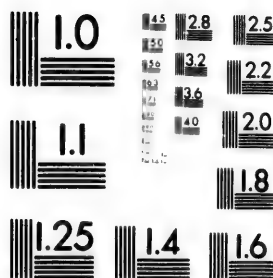
'It has not estranged them, sir. You will find a genuine and loving welcome from them; but——'

'But what, George?' inquired Sir Robert impatiently. 'What care I what has happened, if they are alive and well, and have forgiven me?'

'The fact is,' said Dyneley, 'events have taken place which exhibit Ferdinand Walcot in the blackest colours. I have laid before you the deception practised on yourself—which you apparently admit as fact; and yet—or so it seems to Gresham and myself—you still entertain towards him a certain misplaced kindness, which awakens doubt—suspicion—of your own



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strength of purpose. Should this unhappy prejudice in his favour be made apparent to Lady Arden, reconciliation with her would in my opinion be rendered impossible. I must add, in my opinion, justly so.'

'And in my opinion,' said Gresham, bluntly, 'the man is only fit to be hung.'

Sir Robert turned from one to the other with a pained look. 'I had not expected this,' he said. 'I had fondly hoped you would have spared me. It is impossible indeed that you should understand what my unhappy brother-in-law has been—nay, I confess *is*—to me. If I say he has been in my eyes a link between heaven and earth, to you it must needs savour of exaggeration. Yet "sacred is the flesh and blood to which we link a faith divine." You will retort, "But he has deceived you." To some extent he may have done so: and indeed I know he has. But who shall separate the false from the true in such unsearchable things? Let it suffice that I believe what you have told me: that this man and I have parted for ever in this world. His name shall never cross my lips, but on the other hand let me not hear it associated with evil doing. The fear that it would be otherwise has—I confess it—lain at the bottom of my hesitation to communicate with Lady Arden.'

'But you do not know what the man has done, sir,' urged Gresham, firmly.

'Nor do I want to know. Let him be dead to me and mine henceforth. To those whom he has wronged, through me, I am prepared to make every reparation in my power—though it includes my own humiliation and self-abasement. But of what he has done amiss to myself let me be the judge. What matters it to you, or any one, if I acquit him? For days, and weeks, and months, of late, he has been as it were arraigned at the bar of my own conscience. His case has been pleaded, both for and against, before me. He has been convicted of many things. I have heard, it is true, from your lips a still more damning charge than any heretofore brought against him, but I had already conceived of such an accusation; it does not take me by surprise although it pains me beyond measure; and I have no doubt that you can prove it. Nevertheless, so far as I am concerned—and it is I who am mainly concerned—I acquit—no, I cannot

acquit—but I forgive him. All confidence between him and me is over and gone ; but I nourish no ill will against him. I set the white against the black ; the benefits he has conferred on me against the injuries he has committed against me ; and I cry quits.'

'In other words, Sir Robert,' observed Dyneley firmly, 'you prefer to persist in your infatuation. Are we to understand that you wish to remain ignorant of recent events ; that you resolutely close your ears against the evidence we have to offer you of this man's treachery, fraud, and greed !'

'Yes, I do,' answered the other curtly. 'I do not wish to hear.' He rose from his chair, and paced the room with hasty strides. 'Stay, there is one thing to state, in justice to Ferdinand Walcot, before leaving this painful topic, I trust forever. He may have been treacherous, indeed I grant it ; he may even in a sense have been fraudulent ; though as the treachery and the fraud concerned myself alone, it is for me, not for you, to judge him ; but you err when you accuse him of greed. Through all the years I have known him, and notwithstanding the influence he possessed over me, it was never used—yes, I may say "never"—to his own material advantage. I paid him a certain salary—a small one considering the services he did me in return—but that was all he ever received from me, though he well knew he had only to ask and have, had it been thousands. He was masterful, and fond of power, but loyal and just in his vicarious exercise of it ; his spirit was altogether free from those gross instincts of which you speak ; it was marred and soiled, no doubt, though I once thought otherwise, but it was never polluted—else'—here Sir Robert paused. 'Gresham, Dyneley, there are some matters upon which I cannot speak—and I will not—even to you.'

'There is no need, sir,' answered the curate quietly. 'Upon the matters to which, as I conjecture, you refer, we will agree to differ and be silent. But I may remind you, since you say Mr. Walcot *never* sought his own advantage, that you once made a will in his favour ?'

Sir Robert started. 'That is true,' he said. 'No doubt contingently, that is in case of my demise——'



'One moment, sir ; that will was dictated to you at Halcombe under certain circumstances, and since you are now aware of them, you can hardly deny at Mr. Walcot's instigation.'

Sir Robert's pale face flushed from brow to chin. 'I suppose it was so,' he said ; 'indeed it must have been so. Well, that will is now waste paper.'

'Not altogether, Sir Robert ; allow me.' Dyneley took up a decanter of wine from the table, and filled the baronet's glass. 'When you have drunk that I will tell you something.'

Sir Robert obeyed mechanically, his eyes fixed themselves inquiringly upon the curate's face, as he emptied the glass, and set it down with trembling fingers.

'That will was proved in Doctors' Commons, and Ferdinand Walcot has gone off with the money.'

Sir Robert sank into his own chair, and gazed on the speaker with wild amazement.

'That will—my will—was proved ! What, as though I were a dead man—'

'You *were* dead in the eyes of the law, and of the world. Your dead body—or what was supposed to be so—was brought over from Saltpn Point by Ferdinand Walcot, and buried in Halcombe churchyard. I read the service over it myself.'

## CHAPTER L

## POOR DYNELEY.

WHEN the new History of Credulity, Imposture, and Superstition comes to be compiled, it will have to be recorded of the dupes of Spiritualism that for the most part they were not unconscious that those who professed themselves to be links between this world and that beyond the grave made money from the exhibition of that faculty ; that being possessed of certain spiritual attributes, unspeakably tender and ethereal, they turned them into hard cash ; that having established relations, such as have been yearned for in vain for a hundred generations of men, with denizens of the unseen world, they took commissions for introducing them to less favoured fellow-creatures. A faith that survived this, one would think, ought to have moved mountains, instead of leaving everything—geographically or otherwise—exactly where it found it. The explanation, of course, lies in the gross view which the dupes themselves take of spiritual matters, which prevents them observing the anomaly, far less the irreverence, of the frauds of which they are the victims.

With Sir Robert Arden this was not so : he had been fooled to the top of his bent, and, even when he had suspected duplicity, had stuck to his colours ; the memories of his intercourse with Ferdinand Walcot were so dear, and mingled with such unutterable mysteries, that they had survived the knowledge of his deceit and ill-behaviour. There seemed to him something of the priest's office—nay, of the priest's attributes—about Ferdinand Walcot still, though he had, as it were, poisoned the sacramental elements.

But when it was once made clear that the man had been actuated by mere greed, then in the long hoodwinked, but pure, eyes of his victim he fell to pieces at once like some rotten thing. The means which he had taken to accomplish his vil-

lainy—stupendous as they were in their ingenuity—were lost in the baronet's view in the villainy itself. That terrible revelation of the curate, 'Your body was buried in Halcombe churchyard, and I myself read the service over it,' went home to Sir Robert Arden like a cannon ball; he fell back in his chair under them, as though he had indeed been dead; but his first words were not of amazement, but of self-abasement and contrition.

'I have been fooled,' he said, 'and fooled into evil-doing from first to last.'

To hear him say so, with his grey hair bowed before them, and his hands clasped in mute appeal to their pity, went to the very hearts of his hearers.

So forlorn and melancholy was his condition that it was arranged that Gresham should take up his quarters at the hotel for the night, while Dyneley went back to the ladies to explain matters as best he could. This was not an easy task, nor one that could be procrastinated, since that 'little stroll to smoke a cigar' which Mayne had given as a reason for the young men's absence had extended to some hours, and excited an anxiety it was necessary to appease. Let it suffice to say that the curate accomplished his mission without the interruption of hysterics. Lady Arden wept, but the tears she shed were those of silent joy. It was curious that the thought of doing away with all misunderstanding between herself and Sir Robert seemed to afford her a satisfaction almost equal to the knowledge of his existence.

'Thank Heaven, that villain can never again come between my husband and me,' she said.

Although, too, the absorbing topic for them all was the almost miraculous re-appearance of Sir Robert upon the stage of life, there were other matters demanding discussion of a scarcely less amazing kind.

At midnight a note was brought into Lady Arden in Sir Robert's handwriting. She kissed it reverently, and when she had read it, turned to Elise Hurt.

'My dear husband,' she said, with a tear and a smile, 'has sent you a message, Elise; he is bent upon conferring happiness on others, as he ever was. He bids me tell you that his "in-

opportune appearance," as he terms it, is not to delay by a single hour your union with his nephew.'

'That is so like dear papa,' cried Evelyn; 'no one save himself could at such a time have been so thoughtful, even for those they love.'

Elise said nothing; her heart was too full for speech; but she raised Lady Arden's fingers to her lips, and kissed them. Not an eye of those present was dry, nor closed that night in slumber. The events that had occurred, and the marvels incidentally disclosed—or rather half disclosed—begot in all too overwhelming an excitement. The ladies, however, were persuaded to retire to their rooms, leaving Mayne and Dyneley alone together.

'By Jove,' exclaimed the former, giving for the first time a natural expression to his feelings, 'this is a *most tremendous* business, eh?'

'Not even your eloquence, Mayne, can exaggerate or enhance its importance,' answered the curate, drily.

'But the ladies don't seem quite to see it,' urged the other. 'They perceive, of course, that a miracle has happened in this turning-up of Sir Robert; but that's nothing to what we now know has gone before it; not to mention what is to come after it: I mean its consequences. Instead of Gresham having 12,000*l.* per year—for one thing—he will now only have what his uncle chooses to allow him. For the estates, of course, will revert at once to their former owner.'

'There will, no doubt, be great changes,' replied Dyneley, slowly; his voice was grave, and even sad; but the other was too full of excitement to notice it.

'Yes, and there *have* been, begged, too; who *was* it that got exchanged for Sir Robert, think you; died at Salton Point in place of him, and has been trespassing all this time in the family vault at Halcombe? It doesn't seem to strike you as being anything very remarkable to bury the wrong man—I suppose clergymen are used to it.'

'My dear Mayne, it is not only remarkable, but astounding. I am lost in wonder at the network of intrigue and villainy in which this fellow Walcot enmeshed us; but so far as the dead man is concerned, there seems to have been no crime involved

beyond that of duplicity. One person was merely substituted for another ; the man, whoever he was, came to his end by natural means ; there was no foul play.'

'My dear Dyneley, for a divine of the Church of England you are really the very coolest hand ; one dying person was "merely" substituted for another, you say. But I suppose he had some hand in the substitution himself. He didn't die at Salton Point instead of somebody else to *please* Walcot, I suppose, however persuasive that gentleman's manners may have been. Moreover, even if he did, it strikes a mere layman as rather a ghastly sort of thing for a fellow-creature to do—this sailing under false colours to the very brink of the grave.'

'It was very wrong and horrible altogether,' assented the curate in a mechanical tone. 'But the mystery will be explained, no doubt, one day.'

'One would really think by your way of speaking about it,' replied Mayne, 'that you had got hold of one end of the mystery already ; it seems, however, to have escaped your recollection that Gresham himself went down to Salton Point, and *saw* his uncle after death, when, as a matter of fact, Sir Robert was on his way to Australia. The subject of miracles may pall, and fail to interest, in your reverence's case, through familiarity, but this little incident, I confess, strikes me as the most noteworthy of all.'

'Nay, it only proves that Gresham was deceived in the identity of the man in death, as we were in his burial. The difference between two dead old men is by no means so marked as between two living ones ; and from what I know of Gresham's character—though he is as brave as a lion—he would shrink from such a spectacle rather than narrowly investigate it. Bevill, if you remember, never saw the body.'

'True, true,' exclaimed Mayne, beginning to pace the room, as his custom was when greatly excited ; 'I wish Bevill were here now ; though at the same time I would not deprive him of a certain person's company for an instant. My dear Dyneley, you have set all my blood boiling. You think I am a happy man, no doubt ?'

'You ought to be,' answered Dyneley, sighing.

'Ought, yes ; but "ought" stands for nothing. I shall never

be comfortable, nor quiet, until I have performed my mission in life. Do you know that *that man* has got clear away to Sweden with something like sixty thousand pounds! Whatever doubts you may have had on the matter—for you did doubt; it is a peculiarity of you parsons to doubt, when everybody else is certain, and *vice versa*—it is now proved that Ferdinand Walcott has robbed Sir Robert of three thousand a year for ever.'

'He will not enjoy it,' observed the curate, calmly.

'Well, let us hope not—for ever; at present, however, he appears to be doing so. Bevill writes me that the villain is living like a fighting cock in Christiana. Whenever I think of that, you can't imagine how like a fighting cock I feel myself. I wish I had your philosophic calm, old fellow. I positively feel too savage to go to bed. I shall try the morning air, and another cigar.' And he went out.

He was mistaken in attributing to his late companion a philosophic calm, though the curate did his best to be resigned and patient. The shadow of a bitter disappointment had projected itself upon his spirit, and in that night of wonders had rendered him indifferent and unsympathetic in his friend's view. By the return of Sir Robert all the old obstacles to the curate's marriage with Evelyn had suddenly sprung up anew. At her own implied request he had, as we have seen, put off, out of respect for the baronet's memory, a direct application for her hand, and how could he make it now, when she was no longer comparatively dowerless, but had become as before the possible recipient of great possessions? Nay, although Sir Robert, it seemed, had given his consent to the union of Gresham and Elise, it was by no means likely that his nephew, having made so unwished for a choice, would now be made Sir Robert's heir. The broad lands of Halcombe were more likely to be left to his wife's family, and especially to his favourite niece, than ever. John Dyneley was too good a man to regret that the house to which he was so closely attached by bonds of friendship had regained its head and its protector; but the circumstance, he felt, had dashed the cup of happiness from his own lips. If it is an ill wind that blows nobody good, it is equally true that that is a very favourable gale of Fortune, indeed, which wrecks the hopes of no man.

## CHAPTER LI.

## A MATRIMONIAL TEA-PARTY.

UNALLOYED, for the most part, as was the joy of his family at Sir Robert Arden's return, it was by no means free from embarrassment ; to put the matter vulgarly, and as I am afraid it was actually put in the domestic regions of Halcombe Hall, 'What business had he ever had to have gone away, drat him ?' (But this, it is fair to add, was before it was understood that the legacies left to each member of the household were not to be revoked.) Sir Robert himself was more deeply penetrated by the sentiment thus expressed than any one. He was, to say truth, thoroughly ashamed of himself. But being as sound at heart as a bell, however wanting in moral strength and mental acuteness, he had not that fear of ridicule which in most persons under such circumstances would have been well nigh insupportable. His chief fear was lest his late ill-judged proceedings should have done any irremediable wrong to any one but himself ; extreme sensitiveness prevented his ascertaining this by direct inquiry, but his eyes and ears were open while his tongue was dumb. Unfortunately, since it was understood that concerning a certain personage (who, nevertheless, occupied everybody's thoughts) a discreet silence was to be maintained, conversation for a time between himself and the family was difficult, and the wheels of domestic life were clogged and hampered. At the first meeting, and for the few days during which they remained in London, Mayne was wont to declare that the whole party were only saved from total collapse by the Great Baba, to whom Sir Robert's return was merely a gratifying incident—involving endless treats and presents—without anything anomalous or remarkable about it. He considered dear Papa had played a very clever and amusing trick upon society in putting somebody else into the feather coach instead of himself, and then popping up again unexpectedly.



'I sord you first,' he said, as though it had been a game of Hide and Seek, in which he had been the fortunate discoverer. 'Elly (Elise) sord you second, after I cried "I spy."' All remembrance of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot had apparently vanished from his mind, until one day, fortunately not in Sir Robert's presence, he hazarded a hope suggested by the pit picture in 'Joseph and his Brethren,' that it was Mr. Walcot who had been put into the pit-hole instead of Papa.

'Let us trust so,' said Franky, piously, whose spirit, to say truth, had been slightly dashed by dear Papa's return lest it should involve that of hateful Uncle Ferdy.

In London, Sir Robert's resuscitation was only what is, by courtesy, termed a nine days' wonder—in the metropolis no wonder lasts in reality half so long, but is overlapped by and gives place to another upon the principle of the 'dissolving views.' But at Halcombe a good deal was both said and thought about it, and for a very considerable period. An observation of Mr. Raynes upon the subject, accompanied by a most tremendous grin, was not only characteristic, but perhaps embodied the secret thoughts of a good many people.

'Well, I tell you what,' he said; 'things may be a little uncomfortable at the Hall, but they might easily have been a good deal worse. What with Gresham and the young ladies all choosing their sweethearts—which is a kind of game everybody likes to join in—it's a deuced good thing Lady Arden herself didn't get engaged to anybody.'

Perhaps the wisest course, as well as the kindest, which Sir Robert could have taken was his insisting upon the marriage of Gresham and Elise taking place at Halcombe upon the date already fixed for it: for there is nothing like a wedding for monopolising one's neighbours' thoughts and talk, and for dwarfing all other objects of interest. But for that, the exhumation of that interloping body in the family vault—with a view of course to its identification—would have caused not a little stir, and once more turned all minds to the topic which Sir Robert would fain have had them forget.

We may here say it was exhumed in vain; neither more nor less was found there, alas, than is to be discovered after the very best and noblest of us have mingled for a few weeks with

the dust we came from. It only added another mystery to the romance that overhung the Hall, and set all mouths agape. But to a secluded neighbourhood like that of Halcombe, which had had no topic to talk about since the pedlar was frozen to death on the moor early in the century, such a superfluity of incident was overwhelming.

Their power of absorption was not equal to it ; and just as the boa constrictor, who is made lively with a rabbit, is after a yoke of oxen inclined for slumber, they become lethargic—gorged.

The marriage of George Gresham finished them ; their gluttonous curiosity could only feebly grasp this last incident presented to their notice, and Sir Robert and his late proceedings henceforward scarcely occupied any space in their minds.

The baronet himself almost forgot his own humiliation and self reproaches in the happiness he had conferred upon his nephew ; and indeed he had hit by instinct upon the best method of rehabilitating himself in his own eyes in other cases. For example, though her presence at the Hall must needs have been distressing to him, he insisted on Annabel Spence retaining her old position there ; he had had enough, he said, of punishing the innocent in place of the guilty ; it was but fitting that the remembrance of his transgressions should thus be kept alive within him ; and, moreover, it was the only way that just now presented itself for keeping the penitent girl under the curate's spiritual eye.

Dyneley himself was in higher favour with his patron than ever, and was admitted more than any one to his inmost confidence : which, greatly to his indignation, caused Mr. Mayne to confer upon him the title of Ferdinand the Second.

The wedding was a very quiet one, and beside Mr. Mayne there was but one marriage guest at Halcombe with whom we have any near concern. He was a friend of both bride and bridegroom, and was welcomed accordingly by the whole household, but with no one did he 'cotton' (as he himself expressed it) so closely as with Mr. Mayne. They were sailors both, and were consumed with a common passion for tobacco, which, however, the latter only smoked. Commodore Pearce (as he was always called at Halcombe, because it was understood he liked it) both

smoked and chewed. That this little eccentricity was tolerated, even out of doors, by Lady Arden, was a proof alike of the Commodore's popularity with her, and of the improvement in what the doctors with euphemious vagueness termed her nerve centres. The events that had taken place within her recent experience had had both morally and physically a favourable effect upon her; her ladyship had had in her time detractors of the base sort who had asserted that 'what she wanted was a good shaking;' and this recipe, which had certainly been applied, had really achieved the best results. Like naughty children, who have been given 'something to cry for' which they have not desired, she had now learnt not to cry about nothing. A better wife than the present Lady Arden—though built upon very different lines from those of his 'sainted Madeline'—the Baronet could have hardly found; while as a mother there was no room for improvement in her.

On the day after the departure of the young couple, Sir Robert had a long talk with Dyneley at the Manor Farm of so confidential a nature that even the above fact was hinted at.

'I am more fortunate, my good fellow,' he said, 'than I ever knew myself to be, until now; and happy far indeed beyond my deserts. How untrue in my case is the sad reflection of the poet:—

Could the dead resume their life,  
That they would find in child and wife  
An iron welcome when they rise.

How different—though so undeservedly—have matters been with *me*. And then only look at Gresham;

The hard heir strides about his lands,  
And will not yield them for a day

has no application to him, I'm sure. One would think he had gained twelve thousand a year by my reappearance on the stage of life instead of having lost it. Of course I have made him a handsome allowance, but what is that compared with his prospects of a month ago?

'Your nephew is incapable of a sordid thought,' replied the curate warmly, 'and is thoroughly deserving of your liberality.'

'I am sure of it ; it is fortunate indeed that I have such a noble nature to deal with—I could not endure to think that my coming back was a source of disappointment to anybody.'

'I am sure you could not,' answered the curate.

'Everybody has behaved in the most frank and generous way to me,' continued Sir Robert, 'with one exception.'

'I am sorry to hear there is even one,' replied Dyneley.

'I am sorry too, especially as this has happened in a quarter where I looked for better things. Of course I make allowances for the peculiar circumstances of the case : my unexpected return has put everything so topsy-turvy that I sometimes feel I ought to have never come back at all ; moreover, I had so mismanaged matters of late' (here the colour came into Sir Robert's face) 'that there is no wonder people have lost confidence in me : still I did hope that I should have been given credit by the person I have in my mind for good feeling, if not for some generosity of spirit.'

'I have never heard any one deny you those qualities, Sir Robert ; if he has done so, he is one who does not know you.'

'But this person knows me very well ; and yet he has not only attributed to my nature an undue regard for wealth and position, but has supposed that recent events have taught me no lesson in that respect. When a man has been deceived on the one hand, and on the other has had his eyes opened to real worth and true nobility of character, as has happened to me, is it likely that he should still set store on things evanescent and accidental, and hold lightly such qualities as goodness, truth, self-sacrifice, and generosity ?'

'I know no one, sir, who supposes that you hold them lightly,' answered the curate, simply.

'Well, I *do* ; it is the man who stands before me. How is it, if you not so misjudged me, that you have never breathed a word to me of your love for Evelyn ?'

'Ah sir, I felt—I feared'—stammered the curate.

'You felt I was an ass, and feared to prove it, Dyneley. Well, it was not paying me a compliment, but let that pass. You have been punished sufficiently by your own doubts of my sanity—for they were nothing less. When a man has been kept so long in the dark, as I have been, he does not see things

so quickly as other people : if you wish to know who opened my eyes it was Mrs. George Gresham. I asked her if there was anything I could do to complete her happiness, and she said, "Yes: make Evelyn happy too." There is a straightforwardness about that young woman I greatly admire: moreover, the Commodore has told me such things about her—when the ship was wrecked—as convince me that Gresham has won a woman worthy of him. And I can say the same, Dyneley, in your case, with respect to Evelyn.'

This matter-of-fact and taking-for-granted method of dealing with the curate's passion saved that modest young fellow a world of embarrassment: but even as it was, he did not find it easy to express his sense of Sir Robert's kindness.

'Tut, tut; I am as pleased to give her to you,' said the baronet, 'as you are to take her, only you must not take her *away*. Halcombe and I can't spare her: I am come over here this morning to see what can be done to the Manor Farm to make it suitable for a married parson—and at the same time, since I hate evictions, to keep on Gilbert Holm as my tenant. When you have overgrown it, you can have a wing at the Hall and welcome.'

The curate was in the seventh heaven of happiness, and therefore scarcely in the precise state of mind adapted for the consideration of building alterations; never was tenant so prompt to agree with every plan proposed by landlord.

'This is ridiculous, you know,' said Sir Robert: 'I have suggested three sorts of windows for the drawing-room, and you have said of each that "it couldn't be better." One *must* be better than the other, my good fellow. I'll see Evelyn herself about it—you'll have to ask her, I suppose, when the wedding is to be?'

'Well, yes, sir, I suppose so.' The curate was far from wishing to throw any obstacles in the way of the matter in question; and quite sympathised with Sir Robert's obvious desire that there should be as little delay as possible; but he felt he could scarcely fix a young lady's wedding day without putting the preliminary question to her, of 'Would she marry him?'

'Young people are so different from what they were in my time,' continued the baronet, 'and take everything so precious

coolly. Now, there's Mayne, for instance, a most capital fellow, no doubt, and who will make Milly an excellent husband. In his case there is plenty of money, and no sort of reason that I know of why he shouldn't marry her to-morrow : yet, when I hinted as much to him the other day, he hemmed and ha'd, and said, " Well, not *to-morrow*, Sir Robert, the fact is I have a visit to pay to an old friend abroad first." " Well," said I, quite out of patience with the fellow, " I hope it isn't a lady friend, at all events." And he assured me that it was not. You had better talk to him yourself, Dyneley, and find out when he does mean to marry Milly : and then you and Evy can be married the same day you know.'

The curate expressed his approval of this arrangement, and secretly resolved to carry the tardy Mr. Mayne on his shoulders, if it were necessary, to the brink of Matrimony, and then pitch him over.

## CHAPTER LII.

## ON BOARD 'THE RUBY.'

THERE was this redeeming point even in Sir Robert's eyes in Mr. Mayne's desire to pay his Continental friend a visit before becoming a Benedict, namely, that he was obviously in a hurry to get that visit over. On the second day after Gresham's marriage, he left the Hall, accompanied by his new friend the Commodore, and with the full permission and approbation of the only person to whom he owed allegiance. Milly knew not whither he was bound, nor for how long; but she had not only confidence in his fidelity, but the conviction that it was no mere caprice that was depriving her of his presence. He had assured her of that much, and had besought her to forgive him for withholding a secret from her on the very threshold of their married life.

'On the other hand, I promise you, my darling,' he added, fondly, 'to have none such after marriage.'

There was no reason so far as she was concerned why Millicent should not have been told whither her lover was going, but it was absolutely necessary, for the present at least, to conceal it from Sir Robert; any reference to his brother-in-law was tacitly forbidden to every member of the family, nor would he have approved of any action, no matter with what object, that would have brought Ferdinand Wa'cot's name (and his own unhappy connection with it) into public notice. And the fact was that the destination of Mr. Frederic Mayne was Christiana, and his object the playing out of that return match with his enemy which had so long been postponed *sine die*.

There were difficulties about it that most men would have pronounced insuperable, but of these Mayne thought but lightly; there were objections to it, that in the eyes of men both wise and just might have been thought fatal, and it was for this reason that Mayne kept his own counsel on the matter. If his



plan should fail, none but himself and the Commodore (who, in fact, had suggested the scheme) could be blamed for it, and only one person—the trusty Bevill—need be cognisant of his ill success. *Per contra*, if he succeeded, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot would have to return that 60,000*l.*, which he had annexed so cunningly, to its original possessor. The game was certainly worth the candle, and over and above the stakes—and what afforded even a greater attraction for the player—was the possibility of crying quits with one who had brought upon him personally an undeserved humiliation, who had committed a gigantic and successful fraud, and who doubtless considered himself too clever by half to fall within the scope of retribution.

On the second day after leaving Halcombe, Mayne set sail from Harwich in his own yacht, under the command of Commodore Pearce, who was not unacquainted with high latitudes, nor for the first time had threaded the green islands that stud the quiet firth that leads up to Christiana. Mr. Mayne had business relations, as we know, with a certain house-timber merchant of that place, with whom he had kept up constant communications of late, and whom he had informed of his present expedition. Acting under his advice Mr. Mayne himself forebore to gratify his traveller's curiosity by going on shore at all, but on his arrival at the port kept himself in strict seclusion on board his yacht, and explored Christiana by deputy in the person of his skipper. The Commodore himself did not show much energy in investigating the public buildings or other lions of the place, but took up his quarters at the Hotel du Nord, and passed a considerable portion of his time in the reading room thereof, where he fell in (not altogether by accident) with an English gentleman resident in the town, but who had himself only settled there of late months. This personage, though of attractive appearance, good address, and of undeniably ample means, had his enemies among his fellow-countrymen in the town, who by their machinations and slanders (as he averred) had caused him to be looked upon with distrust, and prevented him from taking his proper position in local society. The cloud that overhung him was but temporary, the calumnies that had been disseminated against him were dying out, unable to confront the quiet dignity of his

blameless life, but in the meantime he was denied admittance to the Athenæum, where the chief intellectual society of the place was to be met with, and where not only English works of reference were to be found, but the London newspapers were filed, an opportunity for perusing which to an exile like himself would have been very desirable. The freeborn citizen of the United States sympathised with this victim to the exclusive and prejudiced ideas of his fellow-countrymen, and offered him, by degrees, the right hand of fellowship. It was impossible, of course, for him permanently to remedy his isolation, but such ameliorations of it as were in his power he placed at his service. Among other things, 'Would he do him the honour to dine with him on board the *Ruby* ?

Suspicion at once showed itself in Mr. Walcot's expressive features. He was not partial, he said, to being on board ship, even in harbour, and could enjoy his new friend's society on shore without trenching on his hospitality.

Then followed a few searching questions as to the yacht and its ownership, to which the Commodore replied with a frank audacity that went further, perhaps, with his new friend than the most earnest simplicity would have done. 'He was but the skipper of the vessel,' he said, 'which belonged to a rich young countryman (one Sir Charles Parker) of Mr. Walcot's, but, as a matter of fact, he had the sole control of her movements. Sir Charles was a minor, sent abroad by his guardian in the forlorn hope that his health, weakened by excesses, would be rehabilitated by a sea voyage. Unhappily the young man could pursue his favourite vice as easily on board *The Ruby* as elsewhere ; and the truth was he was seldom or never sober. He had not even had the curiosity to set foot on shore since he had arrived at Christiana. He did nothing but booze in his cabin and read old newspapers, of which he had an extraordinary collection.'

'Do you mean that he files them ?' inquired Mr. Walcot.

'Well, yes. I think he has *The Times* up to the last ten years ; I reckon, however, he only reads the police cases. I can't say he is an agreeable cuss to meet at table ; but if you would have come on board, we could have dined together very pleasantly and quite independent of him—he would rather

have a bottle of brandy to himself than the best companion in the world.'

There the matter dropped for the time ; but the fact was that this isolated Englishman was interested in certain matters that had taken place in his own country since his departure from it, and had had no opportunity, or had missed it when it had offered itself, of reading any account of them. And after a day or two, during which the Commodore studiously avoided the topic of the yacht, his fish rose to this same fly.

'If your friend, Sir Charles, could be got out of his cabin for half-an-hour, Captain Yule' (for the Commodore had thought it wise to drop the use of a name which Walcot might have heard and remembered in connection with Gresham's shipwreck), 'I should feel really obliged if you *would* let me look at those old *Times*, some day.'

'Sir Charles is never *in* his cabin after eight o'clock at night, but is swung in his berth, drunk. Why don't you come and see the papers then?'

'To be sure ; there is no reason why I should not,' mused Mr. Walcot. 'Let us say to-night, then.'

'To-day I dine with the American Consul,' answered the Commodore quietly ; 'but I am always aboard the craft by 7-30, lest I should be wanted to see to poor Sir Charles. I'll call for you here at 7 to a minute, if that will suit your book.'

Whether Captain Yule did really have that engagement to dinner with the American Consul or not, he appeared at the Hotel du Nord at the hour appointed, and in evening dress, having certainly paid a visit to his yacht in the mean time ; and the two gentlemen started off together, arm in arm, for their destination. The yacht was anchored in the harbour, but one of her boats was waiting for them at the quay, into which they stepped, and were conveyed at once to *The Ruby*. The yacht had borne another name before Sir Charles Parker had bought her, and Captain Yule had been appointed her skipper, so that no suspicion was evoked in the visitor's mind.

There was a moment's hesitation as he left the boat to set foot upon the deck of the vessel, but he quelled it with an effort, and at once followed his host down the cabin stairs. The apartment had, as Captain Yule had promised, no other

occupant but themselves: the fittings of it were handsome but plain, as becomes a sailor's drawing-room; and there was no smell of wine or spirits such as, under the circumstances, might have been anticipated. Moreover, there were a couple of well-lined bookcases, which a person of Sir Charles's unfortunate habits would scarcely have been expected to possess.

All this Walcot's quick eye took in at a glance; and it was with a somewhat uneasy air, though in a tone he contrived to render suitable to the occasion, that he inquired where, amid such order and neatness, the Baronet kept his old newspapers.

'In the billiard-room cupboard, at Halcombe,' replied the Commodore coolly, with his back to the cabin door.

Walcot's hand dropped into the pocket of his shooting-jacket.

'If you take that hand out, Ferdinand Walcot,' said the Commodore, at the same time covering him with a revolver; 'you are a dead man! I can shoot as quick and as true as any man in the States or out of them, and before you can bring that pistol of yours to bear on me, you will be in kingdom come. If you shoot me you would be none the nearer to getting out of this; for a man stands on the other side of that cabin door who has come from England on purpose to renew his acquaintance with you, and who will not be baulked of it for a trifle.'

'And who the devil is he, or you, who dare to lift finger against me, or have any right to stop my coming or going?' inquired Walcot fiercely.

'Well, as to the right I am not so sure; but as to the might, I'm certain,' answered the Commodore coolly. 'You have done things yourself, as I hear, not altogether lawful; and, therefore, might make allowance for those who are driven to the same shifts. And as to who it is that has taken upon him to take such strict charge of your respectable person, here he comes to answer for himself.'

The door opened and Mayne entered, closing it carefully behind him.

At the sight of him, Walcot's keen face grew so black, that the Commodore pointed significantly to the revolver.

'It is no use,' he said; 'we are too many for you even here; and at the top of the companion stairs there are two sentries, who have orders to cut you down if you ever attempt to pass

them. So 'cute a cuss as I took you to be should know when he is beaten. Come, give up that pistol.'

Walcot drew the weapon from his pocket and threw it on the table.

'What is it you want of me? *You, sir,*'—he turned to Mayne—'who call yourself an English gentleman; I appeal to *you*. I call you to witness that though I have made no resistance, I protest against this outrage.'

'Who has harmed you?' inquired Mayne, coolly.

'Harmed me? Do you not see that my liberty is threatened? I demand protection of you as a fellow-countryman. This man has induced me by a false representation to come on board this vessel of his, and now prevents me leaving it.'

'The vessel is mine,' answered Mayne, sternly; 'and you will never leave it to set foot on Swedish shore again.'

'What? Do you mean to murder me, then, out of revenge for a personal grudge? Just because I played that trick on you at Halcombe?'

'It was a very scurvy trick, indeed, Mr. Walcot, since trick you call it; but as to the wrong you did me, it is swallowed up and forgotten in a far greater wrong that you have done to another: a man who trusted in you (which I never did) as a woman trusts her priest, and whose confidence you repaid by a cunning and cruel fraud. As to moving me by soft words, you may spare your breath. I know you to be a heartless villain: you once played upon the fear of an innocent child. You have doubtless forgotten it—it is lost in the wilderness of your crimes; but if you had never done worse than tyrannise, by help of your perjured tools, over that unhappy boy, so help me Heaven! I would make you suffer it: for that I would have had you flogged with a rope's-end, and then, perhaps, let you go; but, as it is, you have sinned in other ways, and your retribution must be of another kind. That noise you hear is the weighing of *The Ruby's* anchor; she sails to-night for England, and you sail with her.'

Walcot started up in violent agitation. 'What? Would you kidnap me? Do you know that that's a hanging matter?'

'One moment,' interposed the Commadore; '*so is murder!* You must really give up that other pistol, Mr. Walcot. I must

trouble you to take it out of your pocket with your left hand, or I shall shatter your right—I draw a dead bead on it as I speak—to a certainty.’

With a frightful curse, Walcot produced a second weapon and placed it by the side of its fellow.

‘Thank you,’ continued the skipper, quietly appropriating them both. ‘I interrupted you as you were talking about kidnapping, I believe; forgive me, sir, and proceed.’

‘I was about to say, Mr. Mayne,’ continued Walcot, his pale face grown livid with hate, humiliation, and baffled rage, ‘that such a crime as you meditate is held outrageous in every land; that neither in Sweden nor England will it meet with palliation, no matter what the motive that actuates you to commit it. This man here, your confederate, as it seems, is either ignorant of this, or perhaps reckless of the consequences; but let me tell you that a heavy and disgraceful punishment will most surely fall upon those who remove me hence by force.’

‘One must risk something, Mr. Walcot, for sixty thousand pounds,’ returned Mayne, drily. ‘You risked something for the same money.’

‘You speak in riddles, Mr. Mayne. I have no such sum as that of which you speak.’

‘Well, it may be a few hundreds more or less. Mr. Hayling has the exact figures.’

‘Mr. Hayling! What has he to do with my property?’

‘Oh! nothing; he has only to do with the property you are holding in trust—let us say—for your brother-in-law. Under the mistaken impression that he was dead—you see I have no wish to be offensive—you administered, it seems, to his will, and filled your own pockets. As you might feel disinclined to empty them in Sweden, I am bringing you back to England. There is nothing like one’s native air, it is said, to recruit the system—perhaps it may also stimulate the conscience.’

‘Oh! your intention in thus outraging the laws of nations is to extort money from me, is it?’ exclaimed Walcot bitterly. ‘You little know the man you have to deal with.’

‘I know something of him,’ replied Mayne coolly; ‘and from what I do know, I think, much as he loves money, he will



prefer to part with his ill-gotten gains to enduring twenty years of penal servitude !’

‘Ah ! I see. You flatter yourself that with the results of this honourable expedition Miss Millicent’s dowry will be increased.’

‘Indeed, my good sir,’ replied Mayne, ‘you are paying too great a compliment to my commercial intelligence. I may tell you, in confidence, that if the money were mine, you should have no choice between imprisonment and restitution ; I would simply give you up to the police, who have a warrant for your apprehension, the first moment we touched shore ; but the interests of other persons have to be consulted.’

‘You will find that they will not be much benefited,’ sneered the other.

‘Very good. In that case my own particular wishes will be gratified, and you will wear a ring round your ankle for life.’

‘Ah ! there speaks your true nature,’ exclaimed Walcot bitterly. ‘Because I humbled you in the presence of another, you can never forgive me. You are one of those excellent young men of whom I have heard so much, who are incapable of a baseness—till their *amour propre* is wounded.’

‘This was the best move that Walcot had made yet in the losing game at which he found himself so involuntarily a player. His menaces and his appeals had been alike fruitless ; but his suggestion that Mayne’s behaviour was actuated by a selfish motive had, though it was untrue, a sting in it : for the young fellow had certainly not forgotten that morning on which Sir Robert had dismissed him in disgrace from Halcombe Hall.

‘I don’t deny, Ferdinand Walcot,’ he replied, ‘that I take some personal pleasure in being the instrument of your punishment ; but revenge on my account forms but a small item in my satisfaction. Every one has his little prejudices, and men who ill-treat children and women are my particular abhorrence. You have made a reference to the day on which you got the better of me at Halcombe ; but you omitted to mention that it was through the perjury of an accomplice—Annabel Spence—’



The face of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, which had been gradually recovering its native hue, here begun to grow leaden again.

'Yes,' continued Mayne, 'she has confessed *all*. Do not flatter yourself that anything you can henceforth do, or say, can have the smallest influence on your brother-in-law. He knows you for what you are. I think I need say no more.'

'I do not believe he knows that this outrage has been committed upon me!' exclaimed Walcot, with a keen look.

'Your judgment of character is as correct as usual,' returned Mayne; 'he does not know it, nor if he did, would he, in all probability, approve of it.'

Walcot answered nothing, and would fain, no doubt, have concealed the satisfaction that flashed from his eyes.

'Moreover,' continued Mayne, 'he will never know it, until the money of which you have robbed him has been returned, or you are safely lodged in gaol.'

'That is what the law calls compounding a felony,' observed Walcot coolly.

'Just so; the law has all sorts of names for all sorts of things, and will fit your case no doubt—though it is an exceptionally bad one—to a nicety. The dilemma to which you refer is a serious one, and has had my best consideration; the result is that you must make up your mind as to the course you will pursue before you leave this cabin. At present the question is one of mere equity, the responsibility of which (if I am in error) I take entirely on my own shoulders. Once in the hands of the police, who are awaiting your arrival upon English soil, there will be no alternative either for yourself—or for Sir Robert. Of course it will be very painful for him to have to listen in open court to the recital of your deceptions and of his own folly;—you calculated upon that, I see, as your last chance; the last chance is gone—the Law, which condemns you, will also give him no escape.'

Ferdinand Walcot had a great command of feature, but his jaw had dropped like that of a dead man. There was a long silence; then in a hoarse voice he said, 'What, in the devil's name, is it you want of me?'

'I want—and I mean to have—a full confession of your crimes under your own hand, including the story of the sick

man who died at Salton Point, which is still a mystery to us ; and also the securities in which you have invested your ill-gotten gains. That is my ultimatum. You have time enough, even with this fair wind '—the yacht was going at great speed, by this time having reached the open water—' to make up your mind before we touch English ground ; but having once done so, your decision will be irrevocable. Here are pens and paper ; whatever else you wish for shall be at your service ; for the rest of the voyage, however, you must excuse my company. It remains with you to decide whether, when I see you again, you will wear handcuffs or not.'

It was more than an hour after Mayne thus took his leave before the Commodore rejoined his friend upon the deck of the yacht.

'My good friend,' exclaimed Mayne, smiling, 'what on earth have you found to talk about with that scoundrel below stairs ? He has the tongue of a serpent, and if you are not deaf to its charming will presently convince you of his innocence. For my part I loathe him so that I could endure his presence no longer.'

'He is a clever cuss, no doubt,' answered the other, dryly, 'and also as you say, very agreeable. He has been so good as to offer me ten thousand pounds to put him ashore anywhere between this and the Sound.'

'I am afraid you would never have got the money,' said Mayne, laughing. 'He is not, strictly speaking, a man of his word.'

'Well, I guess I should,' returned the Commodore, coolly. 'while you were talking to our friend in the cabin, I was watching him pretty close ; it was lucky for you, by the bye, for when you talked of giving him the rope's end he looked snakes, I promise you, and when you said, 'she sails to-night for England, and you sail with her,' you were within twenty seconds of Eternity. If he had but known how to shoot from his jacket pocket you'd ha' been there.'

'I know it, Pearce,' answered Mayne, earnestly. 'One of the things I have been thinking about, under the stars here, is what one should say—and do—to a man who had saved one's life.'

'Tut, tut; let that lie where it is. There is no such merit in a man's having sharp eyes; they are tolerably well-skinned, mine are, and I noticed that when you mentioned 'securities,' our friend's fingers went up with a twitch to his side pocket. Moreover, he did not say a word—such as was only to be expected—about the difficulty of paying money in England when one has one's purse in Sweden. It was but natural, one would think, under the circumstance that he should have asked to go ashore to get it.'

'He knew me by this time better than that, I fancy, Commodore.'

'Very likely, but still it was a chance. And there again, I never saw so clever a cuss, and at the same time such an audacious one, so utterly cast down. By the living Jingo, when he offered me that ten thousand pounds it struck me, putting this and that together, like a flash of lightning, "Why this fellow carries his fortune about with him!" I've known men, bless ye, out West, with forty, fifty thousand dollars in notes in the waistbands of their breeches!'

'But this man?' interrupting Mayne, impatiently, 'did anything happen to corroborate your suspicions in this case?'

'Corroborate? Well, I don't know about corroboration,' drawled the Commodore, at the same time transferring a quid of tobacco from the right side of his mouth to the left, 'but here's a pocket book, which speaks for itself,' and he produced a russia leather case of great size, both strapped and clasped. 'If that ain't full of money, it's full of documents as is worth mooney, or my name ain't Pearce.'

'But however did you become possessed of it?' inquired Mayne in amazement.

'Well, I thought he might hide it like a magpie, in some drawer or locker, or perhaps even drop it out of the cabin window in sheer malice; so I just called in Neal and Jack Bruce "to search a thief," as I told 'em, and Lor' bless yer, in half a minute our friend yonder was as bare as when his mother bore him.'

'Do you mean to say you took it from him by force?' cried Mayne, aghast with horror.

'Well, no ; his clothes were on my side of the room, and he was on the other, and I just took it out of his side pocket without any force at all. It is true that he did call it "Robbery with Violence from the Person ;" but that only shows what a liar he is.'

'But really, Pearce, I think this was going a little too far,' remonstrated Mayne.

'Wal, give it him back again, and let him drop it into the sea : that is just the devil's trick he will be up to rather than let the man he has wronged come by his own.'

'There is something in that, to be sure,' said Mayne, reflectively. 'Moreover, the first thing the Policeman will do to whom he is given in charge will be to search him. You have therefore only anticipated the action of the law.'

'Of course not,' observed the Commodore, 'and if we were to hang him at the yard arm, we should be doing ditto, and saving folks a world of trouble.'

The last observation did not in Mayne's eyes go to strengthen the moral position, but on the whole he judged it better to keep the pocket book ; which without opening — placed in an envelope and sealed in the presence of his companion.

## CHAPTER LIII.

## THE RETURN MATCH.

FOR twelve days the solitary cabin passenger on board the *Ruby* continued resolute in his expressed intention of making no terms with 'thieves and kidnappers,' as he ungraciously termed his host and the Commodore; but on the thirteenth morning, when they had come in sight of the white cliffs of Albion, Mr. Pearce announced a capitulation.

'The coon has come down, Mr. Mayne,' he said; 'only he would like to speak a few words with you before he parts with his skin.'

Mayne at once repaired to the cabin, where he found his prisoner looking thin and haggard enough, no doubt from his mental struggles (for his appetite had been excellent throughout the voyage), but perfectly calm and quiet.

'To the victor belong the spoils,' he said, pointing to the table on which lay a few sheets of manuscript. 'There is my confession, as you will term it: the narrative of how I possessed myself of the property, the whole of which, or nearly so, is already in your hands. Read it.'

The statement was drawn out at some length; but, as we are already acquainted with the principal facts, it is unnecessary to recapitulate them.

Let it suffice to relate what had happened in France and Salton Point.

Although there had been no quarrel between Sir Robert and his brother-in-law at Marseilles, the latter had had reason for supposing that his influence was on the wane. Every day it became necessary for him to combat the other's scruples as to his conduct towards the family at Halcombe, and now that he had lost the assistance of Annabel Spence, his spiritual weapons were no longer equal to this task. It was only, as it were, with

a dead lift that he had persuaded the baronet to go to Australia, whither from the very first he had had no intention of accompanying him. He wished to remove him from England for as long a space as possible, in order to put a certain plan into execution, which required time for its development. The ship was to touch nowhere on its way to the Antipodes, and the Australian telegraph was out of repair, so that he would have many months before him during which no news of or from Sir Robert could reach home. Even with that advantage, the obstacles to accomplishing his purpose might well have deterred a less audacious and reckless spirit. He intended (as, indeed, it happened) to slip away from the ship on the very night of its departure, leaving his companion to cross the seas alone; then to forge a certificate of Sir Robert's death and burial in France, and to come home and prove his will, which his position as sole executor and trustee would afford him facilities to effect. But an unexpected event occurred which offered a much easier method of effecting his object. In Mr. Bevill's 'Reports' from Marseilles, there was mention, it will be remembered, of a certain Mr. Marshall, an invalid, whose acquaintance Walcot had cultivated, and with whom he had greatly ingratiated himself. This man, the victim of a complication of disorders, was in the last stage of illness. Among other things he suffered from, though he had neither kith nor kin, was home-sickness, from which the doctors denied him relief, since his strength was quite unequal to a journey of any kind. 'Let me reach England, if it is only to die,' was his passionate appeal; and in the end it was not made in vain.

After Sir Robert had taken leave of this gentleman, Walcot repaired to his hotel, and, pretending some change of purpose in his own movements, offered to be himself his escort to England. The dying man grasped at this proposal with gratitude and joy. On the same night the *Artemis* sailed for Melbourne a trader was to start for Weymouth, and on board this ship, the *Meduse*, Walcot procured accommodation as for himself and Sir Robert. The invalid was already in such a state that it was to the last degree unlikely that he should be made conscious of the substitution of names: and, indeed, so it happened. The boat that conveyed him from shore, called at the

last moment for Walcot on board the *Artemis*, and everything (except Mr. Bevill's witnessing that occurrence, of which, of course, Walcot knew nothing) went as smoothly as could be desired. He found himself in charge of his dying companion on board a vessel manned by foreigners, with whom, even if they had entertained any suspicion, deception was easy.

It was afterwards suggested by some who were made acquainted with these facts that Ferdinand Walcot never intended to let his charge arrive in Weymouth a living man; that if the device of landing him at Salton Point—which the captain of the ship himself recommended—had not been put in practice, a still darker crime than any which stained Ferdinand Walcot's soul would have been laid to his charge. But of this doubt let him have the benefit. His companion, as we know, *was* landed at Salton Point, and died there, in his bed—a natural death. Mr. Howard's testimony may be held conclusive upon that point. It was upon the whole a great satisfaction to Walcot to find in this gentleman an old friend of George Gresham's, since, provided only that he did not take upon himself to communicate with the family at Halcombe—in which case all was lost—he had in him secured a witness of the greatest value. All his marvellous powers of pleasing were exerted to win his good word, and, as we are aware, he succeeded in his object. The sick man, although prostrate and almost senseless, was indeed 'an unconscionable time in dying,' and every hour of his existence was of course laden with extreme peril as regarded Walcot. When he did die, he wrote at once to Gresham, but returned the letter, which he feigned to drop into the post-office into his own pocket, his object being to delay the young man's arrival, if not until the body should be interred, at all events till it should be past recognition. In the mean time, under pretence of going to London on business, he undertook that expedition to Halcombe, which so nearly resulted in his capture by Mayne and Gresham. It is difficult to account for the rashness of this enterprise, but the probability is that, judging others by himself, and the interest at stake being so enormous, he dreaded lest Sir Robert's will, the secret receptacle of which was known to him, should be discovered and destroyed. Even when he gained possession of it all was not plain sailing; tardy as was



Gresham's arrival, and well as Walcot was acquainted (for he had made it his study) with that young gentleman's sensitive and somewhat fastidious nature, he could not be certain that his ghastly secret might not be discovered after all. For this reason he took occasion to drop a hint or two to the young surgeon of the morbid character of Gresham's mind, and so impressed him with the mischief likely to result from a visit to his uncle's death chamber, that, as we have seen, he almost dissuaded him from going thither at all, and rendered his momentary presence there merely formal and perfunctory.

When that last difficulty was surmounted Walcot had merely to carry home what all men believed to be the corpse of his patron, and to enter upon his own inheritance.

Even if Annabel Spence, tired of his delays and excuses, and bereft of her last hope of his making reparation for her wrongs by marriage, had then turned upon him (as she eventually did), and exposed his treachery, he had made sure of his main object—Sir Robert's money.

For all that, Walcot did not lose an hour in realising such portions of his ill-gotten gains as were immediately convertible into cash, so as to be ready for flight at a moment's notice. That he had long ago some well-shaped intention of acting as he had done seems evident from the fact of the legacies to Gresham and the rest being made payable from the sale of the landed estate, which otherwise would have deprived him of so much ready money. Why the landed estate had not been disposed of, no matter at what pecuniary sacrifice, seems somewhat inexplicable; perhaps he shrank from begging his patron; perhaps, which is more likely, he hesitated to commit a fraud so gigantic, and to punish which, wherever he might hide himself, some unusual means might be resorted to. At all events, with that single exception of the Four Acre field, in which he showed a tendency to accommodate Mr. Raynes, he made no attempt to sell a rood of ground.

At the end of Mr. Walcot's statement was given an account of the investments, both English and Continental, among which the proceeds of the sale of Sir Robert's stocks and shares had been distributed; a very large amount of the securities themselves were in the pocket-book taken from his person, which

likewise contained memoranda as to the rest that put any concealment respecting them out of the question. With none of this, however, did Mr. Mayne concern himself. No sooner did they anchor off the port than a boat pulled from shore bringing a stout little gentleman with a twinkling eye, but of serious deportment.

'Seeing your yacht in the offing—as I believe it is called—I could not resist, my dear Mayne, from coming on board to shake hands with you, and to take a bit of lunch.'

Nothing could be more natural, or at the same time more opportune. Mr. Sturt happened to be taking a brief marine holiday at Harwich—if you had seen him in his straw hat and the scanty jacket that afforded such development to his lower limbs, you would have understood that at once; nothing was less like his usual appearance when engaged professionally; but since he *was* there, and an old friend desired his advice upon a business matter, it was of course at his service.

'These securities seem all right,' he said, after he had examined them; 'and if your friend wishes to make them over to his brother-in-law, for value received (here his eye twinkled more than ever) the affair can be managed in a few days. It's a friendly settlement, as I take it, but these memoranda must be certified.'

'Just so,' replied Mayne, 'and in the mean time my friend will continue to partake of my hospitality.'

Not until the moment came for the final arrangements to be concluded did Mr. Sturt make the personal acquaintance of his new client, though when at Mirton he had been, as we know, within a few miles of him.

'What! Charles Archester!' were his first words upon beholding him.

'Archester or Walcot, it is no matter,' returned the other sternly; he was doubtless not unprepared for the recognition, but it was noticeable that his hand trembled during the process of signature that followed, as it had never done while he was writing out the confession of his crime.

Nothing more passed between them save the few grave words that business necessitated, but when the lawyer and Mayne

went up on deck, the latter at once expressed astonishment at what had passed below.

'Yes ; I knew that man years ago,' said Sturt. 'Nor is it the first time that I have acted for him professionally. I understand now the reason why he was so loth to accompany his brother-in-law to Australia. He has been there before as a convict.'

'A convict !'

'Yes ; I was engaged for the defence at his trial, but the proofs against him were overwhelming, and the jury found him guilty without leaving the box ; he was a forger. He passed under a false name, but it was understood that he was of good family and great attainments. He was said to have a sister who was passionately attached to him.'

'Poor Sir Robert must never know of this,' sighed Mayne.

'Of course not. Nobody need know save you and me. When I think of what he was when I first saw him I could almost find it in my heart to pity the scoundrel.'

'I do pity him,' answered Mayne, softly. 'What a wretched and wasted life !'

'Yes, but how he has wrecked others ; remember Annabel Spence. Old Pam used to talk of Rubbish being something valuable in the wrong place. Now Pity in the wrong place—is Rubbish.'

Mayne answered nothing, but murmured to himself those classic lines in which hope is expressed that 'Auld Hornie' may mend his ways, and find things pleasant after all's done.

The thoughtful silence that had fallen upon both men was interrupted by the incisive tone of the Commodore.

'Our friend below, Mr. Mayne, would have a word with you before he starts on his home voyage.'

Walcot had agreed to leave that very afternoon by a Harwich steamer bound for Christiana ; indeed the warrant that was out against him was a sufficient guarantee that he would never trouble his old acquaintances with his presence in England. Mayne at once repaired to the cabin.

Walcot was standing beside the little table, just where he left him, with his hands folded across his breast, and his

head bowed. He raised it a little on the other's entrance, and addressed him thus :

'I have done many a base thing in my life, as you are well aware, but I never yet stooped to ask a favour of an enemy. I am about to do so now.'

'There you are mistaken, Mr. Walcot. I owe you no ill-will upon my own account, nor do I wish you any harm, nor even to be hard upon you.'

'You have your foot upon my neck, that is,' answered the other, grimly, 'yet forbear to tread with your whole weight. Well, that is something, and shows a certain generosity upon which I am about to trespass. Just now a man came here who recognised me as—as a convict. He told you all about it, I see. Well, I have to ask you—to beseech you—to keep that shameful knowledge from one particular person.'

'That is already granted ; rest assured that Sir Robert shall never know it.'

'You are generous, indeed, but I was not thinking of him. Pray, Sir, keep it also from the ears of Evelyn Nicoll.'

'Upon my honour, I will.'

'I thank you, sir.'

And after a few more words they parted.

Mayne kept this strange appeal even from Mr. Sturt, but it moved him greatly. He told him, however, what he thought was much to Walcot's credit, that the latter had refused certain pecuniary assistance from him, which he had offered at the last moment, lest poverty should be his excuse for his reverting to dishonest courses.

'You were afraid, I suppose,' said Mr. Sturt, smiling, 'that these fifty-five thousand pounds or so out of the sixty had almost denuded the poor fellow of his cash, or that the eight per cent. commission was not a sufficient recompence for his pains and trouble ? I don't think you need distress yourself. Mr. Ferdinand Walcot is a gentleman, if I am not mistaken, who has feathered his nest whenever the opportunity offered, and to whose hands money has stuck whenever it has passed through them. The very ease with which he disgorged so vast a sum is proof to me that there was plenty more where that came from. However, you did quite right not to squeeze him

too tightly. He is not a man to drive into a corner. And I am bound to say you have made a most capital job of it. It was risky—very risky—to the last moment. He could have kept his swag at the expense of his skin at any time. And without a policeman handy, you had no pull upon him whatsoever.'

'Ah! but I had a policeman,' replied Mayne. He whistled shrilly, and as if from a trap-door upon the stage, there appeared at the top of the companion ladder a guardian of the law in full uniform; stout and serious-looking. He made his salute, and stood at attention.

'Take him away, take him away,' cried Mr. Sturt, hurriedly turning his back upon this apparition; 'I would not be recognised as being connected with this matter—for, though there is nothing wrong about it, it is very unprofessional, very—upon any consideration whatsoever.'

'But, my dear sir, he knows you perfectly well,' answered Mayne, laughing. 'Policeman X, don't you know this gentleman?'

To the lawyer's horror the apparition nodded assent.

'I know Mr. Sturt, of Burleigh Gardens, as well as my own brother,' said he.

'What does he mean? Damn his impudence! Who is he?' cried the incensed attorney.

'Don't you know your own detective?' cried Mayne, holding his sides with laughter; 'why it's Mr. Landemann, of Christiana and London.'

'What, Bevill!'

'Yes, sir; it's me,' replied that worthy. 'I came with Mr. Mayne, in case my gentleman down yonder might have any special business to be done for him by deputy in Sweden; and also to make myself generally useful. Between us, I don't think Mr. Mayne and me have forgotten anything, down to these pretty little ornaments'—and he produced from his pocket a pair of handcuffs.

'I see,' exclaimed Mr. Sturt admiringly. 'You could have given your gentleman a good fright, and yet even at the very last have let him go again. Well, I must say, Mr. Mayne, that this return match of yours has been very well played out from first to last.'

## CHAPTER LIV.

## HAPPY HALCOMBE.

THE breaking of Mr. Mayne's news, though it was such good news, to Sir Robert was a little difficult. It was quite certain that he would never have given his sanction to that 'cutting-out expedition' on which the gallant little *Ruby* and her captain had been engaged, but now that it was over, and its end attained, there was not much left for him to object to, especially as his own legitimate share of the prize-money was fifty-five thousand pounds. Mayne told him as much as he thought proper of what occurred, and was only asked one question.

'Has this unhappy man gone back again?' and on being informed that he was, and for good and all, the baronet heaved a sigh of relief.

'This dividend, as you call it (for Mayne had laid great stress upon it not being the whole sum), is as much more than I expected, as it is more than I deserved, and I hardly know what should be due to you for salvage.'

'Oh, as to that I shall not take a shilling,' said Mayne, laughing; 'it was a private enterprise entered into for my own satisfaction, and if you will only acquit me of having wanted to escape from matrimony, I shall be more than satisfied with the result. I really had a reason for postponing the happy event, but now——'

'You may be married to-morrow so far as I am concerned, my dear fellow,' interrupted the baronet, 'and if you won't take the salvage, Milly shall.'

'Indeed, sir. Milly will have enough and to spare,' said Mayne, 'but if I might venture to suggest such a thing, and quite between ourselves, supposing you were to give it to her sister? I am sure it is what Milly would wish. Evelyn is going to marry a comparatively poor man, you see.'

'He won't be so poor as you imagine,' answered Sir Robert, drily. 'But your proposal is just what it should be, and like yourself. Well, now for the Yankee. He's a most capital fellow, and it seems devised the scheme that has restored to me my property. What can we do for *him*.'

'The Commodore, sir, will take no money; it was with great difficulty that I persuaded him to accept a present from me for which I had no further use. Since I am going to be a benedict and a landsman, I have gave given him the *Ruby* to do what he likes with; and he is as pleased as Punch at being captain of his own ship for the first time.'

'At least there is Mr. Bevill,' said Sir Robert.

'Indeed, sir, I am Bevill's own employer, and have been so for some time. I could not allow him to receive *douceurs* from what he would call "another party." If you really do wish me to suggest a little investment, however, I will.'

'I do,' said the other, impatiently.

'Well, sir, there is Annabel Spence. She has a claim upon a certain person which has never been acknowledged, and she has been cruelly wronged by him. I could scarcely appear in such a transaction myself after the imputation the young lady was induced to put upon me, but if you—having long ago, as I feel sure, forgiven her trespass against you—would settle a thousand pounds or so upon her; she has no friend, poor girl, nor home—'

'Not another word, Mayne; you are quite right. "Let bygones be bygones" is a principle that I above all men have need to practise. The girl shall be well provided for; though as to a home, I understand she will remain with Evelyn.'

From that hour, in spite of some previous prejudice, Mayne stood in Sir Robert's favour only second to his nephew and the Curate. This was not because of his sagacity and vigour he had saved so much for him, as Mr. Sturt expressed it, 'out of the fire'—for mere material matters had never weighed with him as with most men—but on account of the magnanimity and tenderness he had exhibited towards others, and also, without doubt, for the tact and delicacy with which he had narrated his late adventure. He had referred so slightly to the object of it, that that feat of reciting *Hamlet* without any al-



lusion to the Prince of Denmark had almost been equalled ; for the name Ferdinand Walcot was gall and wormwood and bitter aloes to his listener and was never uttered save with bated breath beneath the roof of Halcombe Hall. One great advantage of this antipathy in the case of the Master of the House was that it cast a deep shadow of doubt upon certain matters in which this man had affected to be his guide ; in other words, the Apostleship of Ferdinand Walcot having been proved utterly false and fraudulent, he began to entertain no little suspicion of the truths of his Gospel. As time went on he learnt to cherish the memory of his departed wife without seeking to lift the veil which Heaven has placed, doubtless for their common happiness, between the Living and Dead.

As to his relations with those about him, they became more tender and gracious than they had ever been. Dyneley used to say that it seemed to him that Sir Robert almost fulfilled the dream that supposes one to have returned from beyond the grave purged from earthly follies, and convinced that the only true happiness lies in conferring happiness on others. At all events, in so doing, Sir Robert passed the remainder of his days. Moreover, having tried and faithful folks to deal with, he did not make those mistakes into which, in the practice of their benevolence, the most well-intentioned men so often fall.

There were no three happier couples, nor better suited to one another, than those who looked up to him as to a common father.

The union of Dyneley with Evelyn, and of Mayne with Millicent took place, as Sir Robert had promised himself, on the same day, by which time Gresham and his bride had returned to Halcombe, to fill up the gap in that loving household made by their temporary absence.

But Mayne and his wife were often at the Hall ; and Mr. and Mrs. Dyneley settled at the Manor House, as had been agreed upon. In every sense there was never a more " united family " than that at Halcombe ; or a more paternal government than of its rule. The despotism of the Great Baba, indeed, was inflexibly maintained ; but then everybody loved him as the Russians used to love their Czar.

The double marriage was celebrated with much greater *éclat* than that of Gresham and his bride had been, for Sir Robert had now gained courage to face the world—though it was but a small one. All his friends and neighbours were accordingly invited, a circumstance that would scarcely have been worth mentioning, but that a difficulty arose as to one of them in whom we have taken a passing interest. There was no doubt of his being a neighbour, both in scriptural and local sense, but there was a very grave doubt as to whether he should be a wedding guest. It had always, it will be remembered, been a question whether Mr. and Mrs. Raynes, of The Laurels, should or should not be reckoned among the County Society; and though Sir Robert and his lady had decided in their favour, a certain circumstance had recently come to light which rendered this nice point still uicer. This was no less than the discovery of what Mr. Raynes had been before he had taken up the rôle of country gentleman—a problem that had defied the intelligence of the neighbourhood for many a year. Even the subtle young people who guessed the double acrostics in the county paper had been foiled in this. How it was solved, I know not; but, somehow or other, it did percolate down to Mirton Moor that Mr. Raynes had made his money as a clown in a circus. The instant that the fact was divulged, every one recognised its fitness. What man *out* of a circus had ever been seen to grin like Mr. Raynes? His wife had been the Columbine in the same travelling company, by the way, but that was nothing; the circumstance of the Mirton church-warden having been a clown, outweighed and overpowered every other feeling in the public mind; even the Master of Halcombe's experiences of the other world paled beside it.

Of course, as Mr. Raynes paid higher wages to his labourers than any other employer, it was one of his own men who first threw his late profession in his teeth. Hodge and he had had some words about turf-wittling, which ended in the son of the soil losing his temper, and saying, 'Well, at all events I was never a fool in a circus.'

'Well, I *was*,' admitted the other frankly, 'and got 600*l.* a year by it. I wonder how long the sort of fool that you are would take to realize that income.'

The young folks at Halcombe very much applauded this reply ; but Lady Arden was dreadfully shocked at the revelation of Mr. Raynes' past, and I hardly think would have got over it (so far as to ask him to the wedding at least), but for her husband's advocacy of his claim to their hospitality.

'He is an honest man with a kind heart,' was Sir Robert's own view of the matter, 'and as to his having been a fool, I know one who was a great deal bigger one, and who, instead of gaining a livelihood by his folly, almost lost a fortune.'

THE END.

The following is a list of the books in the collection of the New York Public Library, which were purchased by the City of New York, and are now in the possession of the Library. The books are arranged in alphabetical order of the author's name.

1. The first book is "The History of the City of New York, from its first settlement to the present time," by John Smith. It was published in 1790, and is a valuable work, containing a great deal of interesting information about the early history of the city.

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